PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1997–98

COMPRISING PERIOD
3 November—14 November 1997

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THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SIXTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 300**

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 1997–98

House of Commons

Monday 3 November 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Territorial Army

1. **Mr. Swayne:** If he will make a statement on the role of the Territorial Army. [1734]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): The primary role of the Territorial Army is to act as a general reserve for the Regular Army and to provide a framework for full mobilisation in times of national emergency. The TA also helps to maintain a link between the military and civilian communities throughout the country. The role of the TA is being fully considered, along with those of the other reserve forces, as part of the Government's strategic defence review.

Mr. Swayne: I thank the Minister for his reply. He will be aware that the decision to withdraw the series III Land Rover falls disproportionately heavily on the Territorial Army. Are replacement vehicles being delayed up by Ministers? What steps will the Minister take to ensure that the Territorial Army has vehicles with which to train on 2 January next year?

Dr. Reid: I noticed that this was one of the more constructive questions asked by the hon. Gentleman during an otherwise non-constructive speech in the House a few days ago. The answer to his first question is no and the answer to his second question is that everything possible will be done to make sure that the Territorial Army can meet its training obligations not only at local level but at regimental and battle group level.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: Will my hon. Friend have regard to the fact that, if we are to sustain a reasonable, good and active Territorial Army, it must be led by professional people in cities and towns throughout the country? In my area, the King's Own Yorkshire Yeomanry, which used to be the King's Own Light Infantry, is a good and well-maintained territorial unit, but I fear that unless we retain full-time professional people to train, there will be a reduction in the efficiency and appropriateness of the Territorial Army.

Dr. Reid: The strategic defence review will take into account the strength that the volunteer reserve brings to the armed forces and to our regular service men and women. The immense contribution made by the Territorial Army is recognised by the Government, particularly its contribution to our operations in Bosnia in recent times. As my hon. Friend makes clear, a vital part of ensuring that we can meet such operational capability is ensuring that training is carried out professionally and with appropriate resources. That matter will be addressed during the strategic defence review.

Mr. Brazier: Is the Minister aware that no other country in the English-speaking world has less than a quarter of its total armed forces in the form of volunteer reserves? Who is carrying out the studies advising the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State on the future

of the reserve forces? Are they regular officers and civil servants, or are some serving territorials directly involved?

Dr. Reid: The strategic defence review will take into account a range of views from a range of contributors, not least the hon. Gentleman in his published material. The examination will be carried out by Ministers presiding over a range of inputs, including those that are in the Library, and those from the regular forces. We will consult reservist representatives during that process.

Helen Jones: Does my hon. Friend commend the concern of the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) about the effectiveness of the Territorial Army? Will my hon. Friend invite him to show similar concern for the effectiveness of the Regular Army by withdrawing the disgraceful remarks he made in last week's defence debate, which constituted a slur on the professionalism of men and women in our armed forces?

Dr. Reid: With great respect to my hon. Friend, the hon. Gentleman must defend his position. I have no intention of doing that, but I echo her remarks about the contribution that the regular forces and the Territorial Army in particular make to our defence effort, and it will not have slipped her notice that in the TA all posts are open to women.

Nuclear Weapons

2. **Mr. Amess:** What recent representations he has received on Britain's independent nuclear capability. [11735]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Following the announcement of the strategic defence review, we have received many written submissions concerning our nuclear deterrent. We have placed in the Libraries of both Houses copies of those submissions where authors have agreed that we should do so.

Mr. Amess: In the light of the sincere views that the present leader of the Labour party held when he was first elected to Parliament in 1983 in opposing all nuclear weapons, and as those views are held sincerely today by many other Labour and Liberal Members of Parliament, is the strategic defence review considering in any way the abandonment of Trident?

Mr. Robertson: No, it is not.

Mr. Llew Smith: Who are these nuclear weapons aimed at? Who is the enemy? Would my right hon. Friend be willing to press the button to involve this country in a nuclear confrontation?

Mr. Robertson: Since 1994, the nuclear weapons of this country as well as of America and Russia have been de-targeted. They are not, therefore, pointed at anyone at present. The decision whether the nuclear deterrent would or should be used would not be taken by the Secretary of State for Defence, but I remind my hon. Friend that, like all Labour Members, he fought a general election campaign on a manifesto that said that we would retain Trident.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will it cost or save money if the Government decide, as a result of the strategic defence review, to reduce the warheads on Trident? If, as I suspect, it will cost money to take off the existing nose cones and put on new ones with fewer warheads, is that not a terrible waste of scarce defence resources?

Mr. Robertson: The strategic defence review will be based on the foreign policy priorities of the Government and indeed of this country, and we will assess what changes can be made in this country's nuclear posture that are compatible with maintaining a minimum credible deterrent.

Defence Diversification Agency

3. **Mr. Rapson:** When he plans to publish his plans for a defence diversification agency. [11736]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): We hope to publish a Green Paper on defence diversification before Christmas.

Mr. Rapson: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that, traditionally, Great Britain has been a world leader in the development of new technology in the defence sector, that we are much less successful when it comes to exploiting those industries commercially, and that there is a need to facilitate a transfer of technology from the defence sector to the defence industry? When the new defence diversification agency is eventually set up, will both those factors be taken into account?

Mr. Spellar: We recognise the increasing interchange of technology between the civil and defence sectors. That is also recognised by industry. We hope that, through the defence diversification agency, we can ensure that technology is disseminated far more widely into the civil sector so that we can continue to build, indeed rebuild, Britain's industrial base.

Mr. Viggers: Is it not true that the record of defence contractors—of which Vosper Thornycroft and Basys Technology are two very good examples from the constituencies of the hon. Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) and me—clearly shows that they have been extremely successful in using the skills that have developed in the defence area and deploying them for civilian use? Does the Minister agree that the last thing those skilled managements need are so-called experts offering to help them?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman has introduced an aunt Sally that would not be recognised by industry. In fact, there is considerable interest from the defence industry in dissemination—not so much among the prime contractors mentioned by the hon. Gentleman as among many of the small and medium enterprises that are looking forward to using the technology. There is also considerable interest in faster dissemination to industry of the very good technical and scientific work in our

Government laboratories. The hon. Gentleman might be surprised to find how much genuine interest there is within industry.

Bosnia (Implementation Force)

4. **Mr. Winnick:** If he will make a statement on the future of IFOR in Bosnia. [11737]

Mr. George Robertson: The NATO-led stabilisation force, SFOR, will remain in Bosnia until the completion of its mission in June 1998.

Mr. Winnick: First, I pay tribute to the way in which the IFOR contingent, including British Army personnel, has carried out its duties. In certain circumstances, will the mandate be extended, bearing in mind the situation that existed up to the time IFOR went into the former Yugoslavia? Since my right hon. Friend's last statement to the House, has he had any further information about the two notorious criminals and mass murderers who remain free?

Mr. Robertson: It is too early to talk of post-SFOR options, but our view remains that any follow-on force can only be NATO-led, with the risks and burdens shared equally by all allies.

I was in Bosnia last week, and having seen the superb job being done by our armed forces with the other 33 countries involved in the alliance, I doubt whether anybody in this country would want Bosnia ever again to degenerate into the genocide and ethnic cleansing that existed before intervention.

On my hon. Friend's second point, the United Kingdom, with the rest of the international community, remains determined to ensure that all indictees indicted on war crimes are sent to The Hague for trial. What happened at Prijedor in July this year is proof of our national resolve. The responsibility for handing over indicted persons to the tribunal lies with the Bosnian authorities. We therefore very much welcome the recent decision of 10 Croat indictees to hand themselves over for trial at The Hague.

Mr. Martin Bell: Will the Secretary of State assure us that he is studying what the possible consequences might be of a withdrawal if it is decided not to renew SFOR in June next year?

Mr. Robertson: I give the hon. Gentleman my assurance that that matter is being looked at on an almost daily basis. We take it extremely seriously. What matters now is what progress is being made in Bosnia. During my visit it became obvious that substantial progress was being made in creating some new democratic institutions in that country. The existence of a renewed debate, especially in Republika Srpska, between the two elements is encouraging. There is also a growing realisation by people throughout the country that there is no military solution to the problems in Bosnia and that foreign forces cannot remain there indefinitely.

I repeat that I do not believe that the people of this country or of the wider international community want Bosnia to degenerate yet again into the sort of ethnic brutality that characterised the period after the fall of the former Yugoslavia.

Mr. Key: Most people agree that our excellent Bosnia operation is very good value for money, the cost being more than £200 million. In future, however, where will the burden of that cost fall? It is currently met by the contingency reserve, but will it in future fall fully on the Ministry of Defence?

Mr. Robertson: It is too early in the financial year to establish the precise cost of the Bosnia operation to the defence budget. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] That is exactly the same answer as was given by my predecessor in the previous Conservative Government. As and when we know the precise cost to the UK of the Bosnia operation we will determine how much of that cost can be absorbed by the Ministry of Defence; anything over that sum will have to be the subject of discussions between my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and me. I have no intention of starting that discussion at the Dispatch Box.

Madam Speaker: I call the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay).

Mr. Mackinlay: He has dealt with the point, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: How splendid; in that case, I call the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie).

NATO Enlargement

5. **Mr. Tyrie:** If he will make a statement on progress towards NATO enlargement. [11738]

Mr. George Robertson: The Madrid NATO summit invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to begin accession talks with NATO. NATO's goal is to sign the accession protocol in December. At the same time, NATO is working with the three countries concerned to facilitate their effective military and political integration into the alliance.

Mr. Tyrie: What will the cost of NATO enlargement be? I note that, after the NATO summit, the Prime Minister said that the cost would be zero. There have been reports in the press, however, that the Pentagon and the NATO military command estimate that the cost will be between £3 billion and £6 billion. What will be the United Kingdom's share of that cost?

Mr. Robertson: Those are not NATO figures. A variety of sources have produced a number of figures, few of which we consider reliable. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister did not say that the cost would be zero; he said that it would be manageable. The cost of NATO enlargement will emerge from the detailed plans that are being produced, based on the decisions made at Madrid. It would be misleading to present figures at this stage. A good indication of where the costs are likely to fall should be ready for NATO Ministers when they meet in December.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the Secretary of State say what assessment his Department has made of the costs of NATO enlargement to the new member states in raised taxation or cuts in their social programmes, and what

estimate he has made of the likely defence expenditure increase in Russia—which feels that it has a new enemy on its borders and is therefore likely to rearm?

Mr. Robertson: Immediately after today's Question Time, I am going to Russia to meet my opposite number, General Sergeyev. The Russians' opinion is not that they have a new enemy on their borders and the NATO-Russia founding charter was a new chapter in the developing relationships between NATO and Russia. We do not believe that the new applicant countries will have to pay a price that will have to come out of their social expenditure.

We will not allow expansion to bankrupt the expanding economies of the applicant countries, because their continued economic health and market economies are an important element in European security. We expect that there will be costs to them—of course there will be—and that they will have responsibilities, but we and the applicant countries believe that every penny that has been spent on NATO has been worth it and that any necessary future expenditure will be in their and Europe's interest.

Mrs. Ewing: Will the Secretary of State advise the House how critical the issue of the NATO nuclear capability has been in those discussions?

Mr. Robertson: Given that there is absolutely no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members, it can be taken that that was not a major factor in the discussions on NATO enlargement.

Strategic Exports

6. **Mr. Ian Taylor:** When he will publish the first annual report on UK strategic exports. [11739]

Mr. Spellar: The content and timing of the publication of the first annual report on the state of strategic export controls and their application is currently under discussion between the Departments concerned. An announcement will be made in due course.

May I, Madam Speaker, take this opportunity to withdraw unreservedly remarks I made about the hon. Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) during the defence policy debate last week when responding to his point about delays in the issuing of defence export licences? I very much regret that I was misinformed about representations my Department had received on this matter. I have, of course, already written to the hon. Gentleman to apologise, but I wanted to take the earliest opportunity to correct my inadvertent error on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Taylor: On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), I thank the Minister for his personal statement and clarification, which the House will welcome. We are grateful to him. Nevertheless, will he clarify for the benefit of the Defence Manufacturers Association why there is such a delay in the granting of export licences? Export orders are massively important for British business and I should be grateful if the Minister would confirm just how important the defence industry is to British export performance.

Mr. Spellar: The defence industry is a substantial exporter, which is why we stressed its importance so much in our election manifesto and why we are holding regular meetings with defence manufacturers. Some of the delays have inevitably arisen because of the Government's review of the criteria to be considered when issuing licences for the export of conventional arms. My Department has provided staff to other Departments involved in the licensing process to assist in clearing the backlog. Our aim is to ensure that the system is sufficiently flexible to deal with urgent cases. Officials are well aware that undue delay in the clearance of licence applications could result in lost orders or, equally important, in damage to our reputation as a reliable supplier.

Mr. Barry Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that previous Governments did not invest sufficiently in research and development to enhance strategic exports? What plans have our Government to invest in this vital sphere?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend is well aware from previous answers that we are examining the interchange between the civil and defence sectors in defence manufacturing and the interchange of research that that involves. We are also considering much wider dissemination of the work undertaken by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. We understand that much of the benefit that we are now deriving stems from previous research and we appreciate the need for future research to sustain our industry.

Sir George Young: The House will have heard and welcomed the Minister's apology for his unwarranted attack on my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key)—no doubt that particular weapons system will not be deployed again from the Government Front Bench. In view of the implications for jobs and, indeed, for foreign exchange, is the Minister able to give the House a date by which the Government will have reached the previous Government's target for processing export licences?

Mr. Spellar: As I told the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), we are working with other Departments and taking up the matter with them urgently to ensure that there are no undue delays—we are seized of the potential difficulties, which I outlined, if we are not able to improve matters. We certainly take the issue seriously and are taking action on it.

RAF Procurement

7. **Mr. Borrow:** If he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's strategic defence review in respect of policy on RAF procurement. [11740]

Mr. Spellar: One of the aims of the strategic defence review is to ensure that the armed forces are properly equipped to undertake the tasks asked of them. The review will consider what procurement policies are necessary to obtain the best possible output from defence resources for all three services. We will be seeking to establish a mutually beneficial partnership with the defence industry to achieve this end.

Mr. Borrow: I thank the Government for their continued support for the Eurofighter project and its

exclusion from the defence review. Does my hon. Friend share my surprise that the shadow Secretary of State for Defence sought in the House last Monday to undermine the previous Government's commitment to the project by arguing that it should be included in the defence review? Does the Minister agree that the voters of Lancashire were prudent on 1 May to vote for Labour candidates committed to the project rather than for Conservative candidates whose commitment now seems somewhat shaky?

Mr. Spellar: I presume that my hon. Friend was referring to the following words of the shadow Secretary of State last Monday:

"The second flaw is mentioned again in today's edition of *The Guardian*. Excluding defence equipment from the review poses a risk that the equipment will dictate defence policy, rather than the choice of equipment being dictated by policy."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 1997; Vol. 299, c. 623.]

That article in *The Guardian* dealt almost exclusively with Eurofighter. Only two items are excluded from the review. One is Trident, which I presume the right hon. Gentleman was not referring to. The other is Eurofighter, which is enormously important for the future of our armed forces and the RAF and is at a delicate stage of discussion in Germany. Members of the Defence Committee have been in Germany pressing the case for Eurofighter. We welcome their success and believe that all hon. Members should be four square behind Eurofighter, which is important for the Air Force and for the defence industry.

Mr. Evans: Unlike the Labour party, we have not changed our policies just because we have moved to the other side of the House. Our support for the European fighter aircraft is 100 per cent. We want an assurance from the Minister that the RAF will be able to do the tasks that we ask of it after the strategic defence review. Those who think that we can ask industries such as British Aerospace to diversify their Hawks into hoovers, their Tornados into teapots or their EFAs into fridges must realise that that cannot happen. We need to keep our skilled personnel together in factories such as those of British Aerospace.

Does the Minister agree that we must ensure that our domestic market co-operates with the defence manufacturing industries in Europe and the United States? Does he also agree that that is possible only if the Government ensure strong domestic demand?

Mr. Spellar: The Conservatives may not have changed their policy, but they have changed their entire defence team. The hon. Gentleman's silly comments about diversification are countered by the experience of British Aerospace, which has done a great deal of work on establishing industrial parks near its sites to build up its supplier base, which includes many dual-use suppliers. That, not the strange picture painted by the hon. Gentleman, is the reality of diversification.

In opposition and in government we have consistently reaffirmed our support for Eurofighter—not just in words, but in actions. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State went to Germany to urge support for Eurofighter and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister raised the issue with the German Chancellor. Much of the movement on the issue in Germany is down to this Government's resolution.

Comprehensive Spending Review

8. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** If he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to Her Majesty's Government's comprehensive spending review. [11741]

Mr. George Robertson: The strategic defence review is my Department's contribution to the comprehensive spending review. There will therefore be one coherent review of defence.

Mr. Simpson: Given that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that the aim of the comprehensive spending review is to identify savings in all Departments, will the Secretary of State tell the House the extent of the savings that defence will make over the next few years—3 per cent? Five per cent? What is his base line for cuts below which he will resign?

Mr. Robertson: In the great history of brass necks in politics, I suppose that the hon. Gentleman does not shine out, but savings in this year's defence budget will have to be made to fill the holes in capability that his hon. Friends left. In addition to that, we inherited a 3 per cent. efficiency savings target from the previous Government. The hon. Gentleman was a special adviser to the previous Administration, so he knows a little about random, ad hoc, arbitrary cutting of defence budgets. Perhaps he should apologise to the House rather than boast.

Mr. Edwards: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives are in no position to lecture him on defence cuts, when defence expenditure was cut by one third in the past 10 years?

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. They have no justification for lecturing us. Whereas we made specific promises, which we shall keep, they made promises about defence strength that contrast with their record of cutting defence expenditure by one third in real terms in the past decade.

Mr. Soames: Does the Secretary of State agree that the good and ambitious programme of jointery, which was started by his predecessor, is well worth continuing? Does he accept that substantial savings can be achieved by jointery, and by undertaking further joint operations and much greater joint support work? I am sure that he will be supported in those efforts by the Opposition.

What we cannot and will not support, however, are cuts where mergers are made just for the sake of mergers. Does the Secretary of State agree that the integrity of the single-service structure, even within the framework of enhanced jointery, remains at the core of defence policy?

Mr. Robertson: I can easily give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that we shall keep the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the British Army. Like the previous Government, we shall want to look closely at how the three services co-operate, the better to improve the operations and procurement side of our defence. That makes absolute common sense and it is one of the key areas that we are looking at in the strategic defence review.

The word "jointery" is a jargon expression which is virtually meaningless to the outside world. The ability of the three services, with a long and proud history, to work more closely together in an increasingly complicated and changing world is, however, something that most people would regard as common sense. I am glad to keep any tradition that makes common sense for the defence of this country.

Sir George Young: For the record, our support for Eurofighter is total and unqualified.

In the strategic defence review, the Secretary of State has laid particular emphasis on two considerations: first, the search for consensus and, secondly, openness. Will he now admit that his search for those two goals has been fatally undermined by his failure to publish the foreign policy baselines?

Mr. Robertson: We are all glad that the shadow Defence Secretary has belatedly given his full-hearted support for Eurofighter. It did not sound as if that was the case last week. I am not surprised that the right hon. Gentleman has difficulty in coming to the support of anything that starts with the word "Euro" at this time. We all wish him well in bigger fights than those across the Dispatch Box—fights to see whether he will be sitting on the Front Bench at the next Defence Question Time and whether he will be there on his own terms.

I made it clear to the House last week that the Government would outline the foreign policy guidelines that would predicate our discussions of phase 2 of the strategic defence review through a series of speeches that I would make. I made a major speech at the English Speaking Union and a major speech, which I recommend the right hon. Gentleman to read, at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. That outlined clearly the Government's foreign policy priorities, from which we shall design the rest of the defence review.

Eurofighter

9. **Mr. Olner:** If he will make a statement on the future of the Eurofighter programme. [11742]

Mr. George Robertson: The Government remain strongly committed to the Eurofighter programme. The development phase is proceeding very satisfactorily. We are ready to sign the memoranda of understanding for the production and support phases and I hope that as a result of the positive decision by the German Cabinet on 8 October final German approval will be secured in the Bundestag later this month to proceed to the next phases. The aim of the four partner nations is to sign the memoranda of understanding for these phases in December 1997 and the relevant contracts very soon thereafter.

Mr. Olner: I thank my right hon. Friend not only for that reply, but for his earlier replies which show the Government's support for Eurofighter. That contrasts strongly with the views of the previous Government, who fought a general election campaign on the basis that, if the Labour party formed a Government, it would scrap this wonderful aeroplane. That was not true and what the Secretary of State has said has proved that.

Will my right hon. Friend give a further assurance that he will not listen to the siren voices on the Opposition Benches or to the shadow Secretary of State? Will he give my constituents at the Rolls-Royce aero-engine plant in Coventry the assurance that they and others working on Eurofighter will have the Government's full support?

Mr. Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend and put on record my gratitude for his robust support for a project that is important not just in defence terms, but in terms of the degree of European co-operation that we can find in respect of the most effective combat aircraft to meet the needs of the RAF and other European air forces. As a multi-role weapons system, it offers the operational flexibility necessary to meet the uncertain challenges of the next century. That is why the previous Government backed it and the present Government will continue to support it. I hope that all hon. Members will realise its value.

Mr. Blunt: Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as Eurofighter is exempt from the strategic defence review, which is the Ministry of Defence's contribution to the Government's fundamental expenditure review, should there be any cost overruns on that £14 billion project—the most expensive procurement project ever undertaken—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Mr. Soames—that is not our custom. They may be pretty girls, but we do not hold conversations with officials in the box. You may talk to me, Mr. Soames.

Mr. Blunt: Will the Secretary of State confirm that, as Eurofighter is exempt from the review, which is the Ministry of Defence's contribution to the Government's fundamental expenditure review, any overrun on that £14 billion project—the most expensive procurement project every undertaken by the Ministry of Defence—will not be allowed to skew the rest of the defence programme, but will be charged to the reserve?

Mr. Robertson: I do not know why you are so intolerant, Madam Speaker. I thought that bonding was the only thing that united the Conservative party at present.

Unlike the previous Government, we intend to keep a tight grip on all procurement projects. The House may be interested to learn that the hon. Gentleman was a special adviser in the Ministry of Defence under the previous Administration, so if anyone knows about cost overruns and in-service dates that have yet to appear, he should be the expert.

Armistice Day

10. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** What are his plans for commemorating armistice day. [11743]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Defence will attend the Cenotaph ceremony on Remembrance Sunday, as will I and my right hon. and noble Friend the Minister of State for Defence Procurement. This is the formal national occasion for remembering all those, whether in a military or a civilian capacity, who made the supreme sacrifice.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister join Conservative Members in supporting the British Legion and its proposal

that a two-minutes silence should be observed on Tuesday 11 November? If so, how does the Minister propose to build on the success of the previous Government a year ago in promoting that idea?

Dr. Reid: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are committed to ensuring that Remembrance Sunday and the two-minute silence on that day are not forgotten, but observed with full dignity, respect and honour. He will realise, of course, that the observance of a period of silence either on Remembrance Sunday or on 11 November must be a personal decision. Indeed, one of the freedoms for which those who fell fought was the right of individuals to make that decision. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that Ministers, including myself, and their officials will be observing that silence on both those dates.

Mr. Grocott: Amid the many and varied ways in which different communities commemorate Armistice Day, may I tell my hon. Friend about a very moving ceremony which takes place every year in my constituency and, no doubt, elsewhere? It is called the Ceremony of Light, when 100 names of people who have given their lives in wars this century are read out and for each name a candle is lit, usually by a young person in the constituency. Although I attend the ceremony every year, each year is deeply moving—not least because it involves people of all generations. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital that all generations—especially young people as they grow older—understand the awesome sacrifices that were made and the reasons why they were made to defend our freedoms?

Dr. Reid: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I am sure that the House will have found his description as important and moving as I did. It is absolutely essential that young people not only formally remember but recognise those who fell for this country—first because many of those who fell gave up their youth for succeeding generations, and secondly because, unless the torch of freedom and the sacrifices made are passed from generation to generation, we shall not retain the will power to stand up for democracy and freedom. That is what the people who died in the second world war died for. All of us and any future generation will forget that to the peril of the very democracies and freedoms for which previous generations fell.

Mr. Trimble: The Minister, like most hon. Members present, is wearing a poppy. Will he comment on the behaviour of the management of Coates Viyella Ltd. in Londonderry, which has sent home and suspended more than a dozen workers for wearing poppies and has even compelled visiting executives from England to remove poppies while on the plant? Does the Minister agree that a perverted interpretation of legislation is being used to support that outrageous action, and that the legislation should be clarified so that no person will be penalised in future for wearing a poppy?

Dr. Reid: I recognise the strength of feeling that the hon. Gentleman brings to the matter not only because of Remembrance Sunday, which is coming up, but because yesterday was the 10th anniversary of the terrible massacre in Enniskillen, which was a dastardly act by any standards. I had the privilege of attending a ceremony held by representatives of the Enniskillen British Legion yesterday and presented them with a wreath from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to take back to Enniskillen.

The hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) will understand that, due to the nature of discussions that we are having on Remembrance Sunday and exchanges across the Dispatch Box, I do not want to address that particular instance on this occasion. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me, I am sure that we could meet on this subject and I could give him satisfaction.

Gulf War Illness

11. **Mr. Todd:** If he will make a statement on the Government's policy relating to Gulf war illnesses. [11744]

Dr. Reid: The Government are committed to dealing openly, honestly and sympathetically with the concerns of Gulf veterans who are ill. We shall continue to give the issue the highest priority.

Mr. Todd: I thank the Minister for that answer on behalf of constituents of mine who have raised the issue. Are we taking steps to gain access to American research on the subject?

Dr. Reid: I assure my hon. Friend that we are keeping in close touch with our American colleagues. In fact, I was in Washington a fortnight ago having a meeting with the joint inter-agencies which are handling the issue. We are also extending to the Americans any information that we receive—from fact finding and reports that have recently been published and from any future research discoveries that we might make. The American assistance is particularly useful with regard to chemical weapons. As in all other spheres of information, I should make it plain that we will release that information—as well as all other information—for the benefit of veterans.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: As the Minister has just acknowledged, exposure to chemical weapons from the regime of Saddam Hussein is a possible cause of Gulf war syndrome. Is it not therefore all the more chilling to learn that Saddam Hussein is persisting in the development of weapons of mass destruction, especially the nerve agent VX4, and is declining to allow United Nations inspectors access, in accordance with Security Council resolutions, to inspect the plants where the development is taking place? Can the Minister confirm that the Government stand four square behind the United Nations Security Council resolutions which authorise—if all else fails—the use of proportionate force?

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman and take this opportunity to make it plain that Saddam's actions in relation to the United Nations Special Commission are completely unacceptable and he must now comply with the United Nations Security Council presidential statement of 29 October. We shall give our full support to the Secretary-General in his efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the problem and we are in close contact with our allies on that issue. Since the hon. and

learned Gentleman asks the question, I confirm that we do not advocate the use of force, but we do not rule it out if Saddam fails to comply.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Minister told the House during last week's two-day defence debate that, despite the best endeavours of his Department, he still has not been able to find out precisely what mixture of chemicals was given to how many soldiers serving in the Gulf. What further investigations has he made since then? In particular, what batches of chemicals were purchased from which chemical manufacturers, and on what day were they given to which units? Surely it is possible to arrive at a realistic conclusion.

Dr. Reid: The hon. Gentleman will understand if I say, with all due respect, that I have done more in six months on that matter than was done in the previous six years. I issued a detailed paper on organophosphates five days ago, and a detailed paper on the vaccines used has also been issued, warts and all, including information about decisions that hon. Members may find questionable. I have also doubled the resources allotted to the research side, put more people through the medical assessment in the past six months than were assessed in the previous four years, and established a fact-finding group to ascertain the answers to the questions that the hon. Gentleman raises.

I pledge again that the Government are committed, out of a duty of honour, to making all the information available to the hon. Gentleman's constituents and to those who served their country in the Gulf. If I cannot make up for all the mistakes of the previous six years in my first six months, I shall do my damnedest to do so in my first year.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

National Audit Office

34. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the funds available for the National Audit Office. [11769]

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): The National Audit Office corporate plan for 1998-99 to 2002-03 showed an increase in net cash resources from £39.8 million to £41.5 million in real terms over the next five years. There will be considerable increases in work load in this period as a result of the introduction of resource accounting, greater examination of regularity and propriety issues and involvement in accounting and tendering procedures in public-private partnerships. The cost of the extra work will be partly offset by continuing efficiency savings.

Mr. Bruce: I thank the right hon. Gentleman—I hope that he is indeed a right hon. Gentleman because he certainly should be by now—for that answer. Does he agree that the National Audit Office gives good value for money and that its reports often lead to further savings? However, will the Public Accounts Commission consider whether we should put more funds into checking what is happening in local government? District auditors are supposed to ensure that the correct procedures are followed, but does the right hon. Gentleman agree that they sometimes get too close to local authorities and that many problems seem to be missed? Is it not time that we got to the bottom of what is happening in local government?

Mr. Sheldon: I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the value for money that is obtained by the National Audit Office. It is one of the great ventures of the House, and since its introduction in 1983, it has succeeded in meeting all the aims of the National Audit Act 1983.

Local government is a matter for the Audit Commission. As Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, I have co-operated with the commission, but local government is entirely a matter for it, as are any proposals that it may make to the National Audit Office or to the PAC.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the excellent statement on public-private finance in the annual report of the NAO is drawn to the attention of all hon. Members so that they do not forget that the taxpayer has a vested interest when looking at all alternatives to the use of taxpayers' money to find out whether better value might be provided by remaining within the state system?

Mr. Sheldon: The private finance initiative report by the NAO is very important and will be considered by the PAC in due course. We await that examination.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners was asked—

Millennium

35. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** What plans the Church Commissioners have to mark the millennium. [11770]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner): The Church Commissioners are conscious that the millennium is both an inclusive national celebration and a significant Christian anniversary, and the Church is seeking to ensure that the religious and spiritual nature of the year can be appropriately reflected within the context of the new millennium experience.

The Church is planning to give special millennium candles to every household and to encourage people to take them with them wherever they go on millennium eve—just as individuals took candles to Wembley stadium in honour of Diana, Princess of Wales, following her tragic death. There could then be a major moment of national reflection in silence as people stand together and light their candles, one from another. This is intended as the churches' gift to their local communities and something that everyone can take part in if they wish.

Sir Sydney Chapman: While welcoming that statement, may I urge the hon. Gentleman to ensure that

the churches lobby so that they are at the very centre of the millennium experience—not least because the very name "millennium" is based upon the perceived birth of Christ? Will he use his unique position—linking, as he does, his fellow commissioners with Government Ministers—to help to ensure that we celebrate the millennium by ensuring that our glorious ecclesiastical architectural heritage is maintained into the next millennium? I am referring to cathedrals, churches and chapels of all faiths throughout the United Kingdom. An example of this work, incidentally, is the initiative successfully announced by my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), the previous Heritage Secretary.

Mr. Bell: I am glad to see the right hon. Lady in her place and I am happy to endorse the right hon. Gentleman's statement. I should add that every church bell in the land will be rung at noon on Saturday 1 January 2000 for five minutes, followed by 10 minutes of prayer which will be open to all. In relation to the architecture to which he referred, these buildings are a testament to the Church, and as commissioners we shall work with Ministers to ensure that that remains the case.

Mr. Skinner: Has my hon. Friend thought through the proposition that everyone could carry a candle? Is he aware that, if the so-called hundreds of thousands turn up at the dome with lighted candles, they might set fire to it?

Mr. Bell: My hon. Friend and I share a common heritage—we both come from mining families and our fathers went to work with candles. The dome is in the hands of the Minister without Portfolio, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)—capable hands, but not those of the Church Commissioners.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman ask the commissioners to throw their weight about with regard to what the state and the Church will do at the time of the millennium? First, will he make sure that we do not spend unnecessary money on a temporary construction at Greenwich when we could invest in more beneficial activities for the longer term—perhaps for people at the bottom of the social scale?

Secondly, will he try to persuade the state to encourage the international community to write off international debt—a real jubilee for poorer countries, who would be liberated for the next millennium? Finally, is he aware that—as at Canterbury cathedral and, increasingly, Westminster abbey—the great churches of the land are either closed or too expensive to get in?

Mr. Bell: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his suggestions. The Church Commissioners are in touch with the Minister without Portfolio about the dome. We are seeking to have a chapel in the dome to celebrate the millennium with an appropriate exhibition. With the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, we are also seeking to ensure that while it is a Christian anniversary it is also shared on a multi-faith basis so that there is a proper spread throughout our land of celebrations on the millennium. The other points are for other Ministers and I will ensure that they reach them.

Clergy Pensions

36. **Mr. Pike:** What representations he has received regarding changes in funding for clergy pensions. [11771]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The commissioners have been engaged in extensive correspondence with the parishes protection group on a wide range of issues relating to its work—in particular, the proposals for the future financing of clergy pensions. The group has made a number of assertions that the commissioners do not accept, and they have made their position clear to the group. I have invited my hon. Friend to see me about those matters and I look forward to his taking me up on that offer.

Mr. Pike: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Is he satisfied that the pensions scheme as it is structured is actuarially sound for present and future members and that the parishes are not being asked to bear an onerous burden that they cannot meet?

Mr. Bell: The commissioners' actuaries have confirmed that sufficient funds are available to meet the past service liability for pensions. Future service is a matter for the pensions board and its actuaries, but dioceses are aware of the extent of their liability and are confident that the necessary funds can be raised.

Mr. Wilkinson: Would it not be beneficial for the fund and ease the burdens on it if clergy could be encouraged to continue serving as parish priests or in other capacities beyond the normal retirement age? In many spheres of activity, clergymen even in their early 70s could perform useful functions, perhaps on more modest stipends. As few people are coming into the ministry, is that not the sort of thing that the Church Commissioners should support?

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his suggestion, which I should like to pass on to others.

Breast Cancer Screening

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement on cancer screening.

In June this year, it was revealed that 12 women in Devon who had not been referred for treatment after being screened for breast cancer had subsequently developed cancer, and two of them had died.

On 9 June, in response to a private notice question from the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who is not here because he is in hospital, I reported what I had then been able to find out about this awful situation. I announced that I had asked the chief medical officer, Sir Kenneth Calman, to establish the facts about the breast cancer service in Exeter and to review the breast cancer screening programme nationwide in the light of what was revealed in Exeter.

The chief medical officer was assisted by a small team of people with specialised knowledge of various aspects of breast cancer. Their initial inquiries revealed wide-ranging shortcomings in Exeter and in regional and national aspects of the breast cancer screening programme. With my agreement, Sir Kenneth Calman asked the retiring chief medical officer for Wales, Dame Deirdre Hine, to lead a small team to review the national and regional arrangements for delivering quality assurance for breast screening.

Professor A. R. M. Wilson, the director of the national breast screening training centre in Nottingham, was asked to conduct an independent expert audit of 1,920 mammograms of all women who had been called back for further investigation after screening in Exeter and of all women who had developed cancers in the period between screenings in the past two years.

Completion of the chief medical officer's report was held up by the need to complete the audit of mammograms and, most recently, by a legal challenge from one of the doctors concerned. The report was completed last Friday afternoon. I am publishing it today.

The report covers three aspects: the independent assessment of the technical competence of breast screening in Exeter, based on the audit of mammograms; the examination of the organisational, managerial and quality control arrangements in the Exeter breast cancer unit; the review of national and regional arrangements for quality assurance of the breast cancer screening service. The report concludes that there were serious faults in all three.

The audit of mammograms concluded that there was evidence of failure on the part of the two radiologists involved to provide care to the standard expected of consultants involved in mammographic screening. That had not been picked up or tackled by the management of the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS trust over a number of years. It had been aware of questions of professional behaviour and other concerns about the operation of the breast unit, but no action had been taken. Management structures were confused. Lines of accountability were unclear. There was concern among staff and a lack of multi-disciplinary working. Some patients had complained about the attitude shown to them. Staff felt that their views had been ignored by management. They were right.

Responsibility for making sure that all breast screening units operated to a high national standard and that any shortcomings were spotted and dealt with promptly and effectively used to rest with national health service regions, but when regional health authorities were abolished, responsibilities for quality assurance for breast cancer screening were split. In the south-west, the Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly health authority took on the role of lead purchaser for breast screening quality assurance. The changes left the regional staff with some quality assurance duties, but neither the resources nor the authority to do the job. That situation applies throughout the country. Lead purchasing has failed the breast cancer screening service. The quality assurance system does not work.

As a result of all this, disciplinary proceedings have been instituted by the Royal Devon and Exeter trust against Dr. Brennan, the doctor in charge of the breast unit, who has been suspended. The other radiologist, Dr. Graham Urquhart, is employed by the South Devon trust, which has commissioned an audit of all his radiological work. Neither doctor is now involved in breast imaging.

Of the 1,920 women whose mammograms were reviewed in the audit, 229 were judged to need further assessment. All the women affected have been contacted, and the last one is due to be seen by clinicians on 10 November.

I know that all women in the Exeter area will be worried about whether they can rely on their screening result. The professional advice that I have received is that no other women in the area need be recalled or rescreened. The main problem was not in spotting possible cancers but in dealing with them appropriately, once identified. I am advised that all the women who needed to be recalled have been recalled. All women should, of course, continue to attend for routine screening appointments.

The report contains many detailed recommendations that will need to be carefully considered. I can announce today, however, the following action that is already being taken to implement the main recommendations: the Royal Devon and Exeter trust is taking action to make sure that the breast unit is properly managed in future and that arrangements are in place for staff to be able to report when things are going wrong; I am placing an explicit requirement on health authorities and trusts to commission and deliver breast cancer screening to national standards; all NHS trusts with breast cancer screening units are being told to review their arrangements to make sure that they deliver a high-quality service, and they must report the outcome of their reviews by the end of January 1998; all health authorities, trusts and regional offices will be expected to agree action plans by the end of February 1998 to ensure that all screening programmes meet national standards.

By 1 April 1998, responsibility and resources for breast screening quality assurance will be removed from lead purchasers and restored to NHS regional officers, who will be given all the necessary authority to secure quality assurance. In the last resort, they will be able to close down screening units that fail to meet national standards.

The shortcomings that the inquiry has revealed and the recommendations that it makes very much parallel the recent report and recommendations made by Sir William

Wells following his inquiry into the failures of the cervical cancer screening service provided by the Kent and Canterbury NHS trust. He singled out the failure of lead purchasing, the ineffectiveness of local management, the failure of arrangements for staff to report what was going on, and the absence of effective quality assurance.

Many of the problems at Exeter and Canterbury sprang from the shortcomings of the internal market, which included the absence of arrangements to secure high and uniform standards, even for cancer screening systems that were supposed to be national; legal obstacles to intervening in the affairs of trusts that are falling down on the job; staff not being able to speak their minds. All that must be changed, and the new Government will make the necessary changes. Our forthcoming White Paper on the future of the national health service will spell out proposals to improve the quality of treatment and care by setting high standards and putting in place machinery to ensure that the agreed standards are met. We have already announced the end of gagging clauses in staff contracts.

Cancer screening has two purposes: to identify patients who need treatment and to reassure patients who do not. The breast cancer screening service in Exeter and the cervical cancer screening service in Canterbury failed on both counts. They failed to ensure prompt treatment for women with cancer. For other women with cancer they gave false reassurance. They left thousands of other women not knowing one way or the other. They were a disgrace.

The failure to have in place a system that could identify promptly things that were going wrong and then put them right was also a disgrace. The final disgrace would be if those deplorable failures were to undermine the faith of women in this country in the value of cancer screening. Therefore, I urge all women to continue to attend for screening for both breast and cervical cancer, because, despite what has gone wrong, screening remains the best way of identifying breast and cervical cancers and pre-cancers in time to make possible early and, therefore, more effective treatment.

Finally, I offer my deepest sympathy to all the women who have suffered as a result of these failures and to their families. We owe it to them all to put things right, and we will.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I know that this is a subject in which he has taken a very serious interest for a long time. In particular, he has campaigned for better cervical smear testing and breast cancer screening. I join him in expressing my sympathy for the women concerned. This is a simply dreadful disease, and the uncertainty must have been really terrible.

The breast cancer arrangements in Exeter and East Devon failed to ensure proper treatment for breast cancer, and they gave false reassurance. I very much hope—I join the Secretary of State in this—that the inquiry will finally put matters right. I remind the House that it was the last Conservative Government—the first EU country and one of the first in the world—who introduced a nationwide breast screening programme based on computerised call and recall and who introduced the Calman-Hine recommendations, which were praised by the Macmillan Fund cancer relief briefing, which said that the Government had an excellent record on them.

This matter was first raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) in a private notice question in June, and by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) in an Adjournment debate in the same month. They are not here today, unfortunately, as my right hon. Friend is in hospital and my hon. Friend, I am afraid, is stuck in a traffic jam.

The Secretary of State sought in part to blame what happened on the internal market, but was it not a failure of two individual consultants? The report blames them quite clearly. If the Secretary of State is saying that there is a far more widespread failure across the country, perhaps he will tell us. Is everything being done for the approximately 1,900 women who are directly affected?

The right hon. Gentleman told us about the women who have been recalled, but have those who have not been recalled been given a reassurance that they do not need to be? He told us what is being done at the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital, but are there wider lessons that he feels have been learnt across the country which are not just the failure of individual consultants? Does he have reason to believe that similar errors are being made elsewhere? In particular, can he confirm that absolutely nothing that has arisen out of the inquiry is being withheld or not being published?

Should there be a revised national protocol on screening to promote best practice? Is the Secretary of State satisfied that the existing protocol contained in the NHS executive letter of 23 January 1995 is working satisfactorily? That executive letter expires on 28 January next year. Do the results of the inquiry require any change to those protocols? Referrals in the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital seemed to be solely to radiologists. Even doubtful cases were not referred to surgeons for a second opinion. Is that right, or should such practices change?

I apologise to the Secretary of State if those questions are answered in the report, but I received a copy of his statement only at a quarter past 3, and, although I managed to read that, I did not manage to read the whole report.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the commitments on cancer treatment made by his party before the election still stand, and will he tell us the time scale for their implementation? I shall remind him what they were. In April this year, the Minister for Public Health said:

"The waiting time to see a specialist and receive a diagnosis should end. If a woman has discovered a breast problem and is concerned, she should be able to see her GP, and be seen without delay by a specialist team at a breast cancer clinic, who can carry out the essential tests on one day."

What progress has been made, and when does the Secretary of State expect to be able to fulfil that pledge?

In September 1996, the Labour party announced that the first £30 million of the first £100 million saved by cutting down on red tape would be used to reduce waiting times for cancer surgery. What progress has been made with that money, and when does the Secretary of State expect it to be fully committed?

In a statement in June this year, the Secretary of State said that, as a result of the decision to postpone the eighth wave of fundholding, £20 million would be saved, of which the first £10 million would be available to breast cancer specialist centres throughout the country. Will he tell the House whether that has happened?

[Mr. John Maples]

Is the Secretary of State aware that the *Health Service Journal* reported that many health authorities had already spent hundreds of thousands of pounds equipping potential GPs? Quite a lot of GPs are becoming fundholders next year, so it would appear that the eighth wave has not been totally postponed.

I notice that the Secretary is not taking a single note of any of these questions, which perhaps shows the regard he has for the importance of reporting to the House on his duties. These are serious questions, and people outside the House have an interest in having them answered. He apparently does not share that view.

Has the postponement of the eighth wave of fundholding saved £20 million? That seems unlikely. If £10 million has been spent on breast cancer services, from where has that money come? What other national health service budget has been reduced to fund the service? Is an extra £30 million actually being spent on cancer services? Since June, when the Secretary of State made the promise, has £10 million been spent on improving breast cancer services?

The Secretary of State mentioned his forthcoming White Paper. We were led to expect it in September, and then in October, so he is obviously having some difficulty with it. Will he tell us when it will be published?

Mr. Dobson: I shall deal briefly with the points raised by the shadow Secretary of State that are irrelevant to breast cancer screening. To the best of my knowledge, we never said that we would produce a White Paper in September: we expect that it will be produced this month.

The hon. Gentleman asked about extra spending on breast cancer services. We announced the postponement of the eighth wave of fundholding, which released £20 million, £10 million of which has already been spent in cancer centres all over the country to improve the service provided for women with cancer, although it is not to do with screening. I emphasise that that money has not merely been released: it is being spent now in various parts of the country.

An NHS executive letter is going out today spelling out the changes that we require. No doubt further executive letters will go out when we have had time to consider the more detailed recommendations in the report, which was completed only on Friday. It is foolish for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that this matter springs only from the shortcomings of two radiologists in Exeter. Headlines in the report say:

"Lead purchasing has failed the breast screening programme"

and:

"Lack of expertise and resource in lead purchaser Health Authorities"

and:

"The result: a quality assurance service that is unable to take effective action".

The basis of my statement is that there is no point in trying just to blame two radiologists: there will always be things that go wrong with the reading of mammographs and the reading of cervical cancer slides. The object is to have a system that identifies things when they go wrong, and puts people in positions of authority to do something about it. The system that we inherited from the last Government, which probably was not too strong in the first place, was seriously weakened by the changes that occurred when regional health authorities were abolished, and that has meant that the quality assurance system throughout the country is weak. It needs to be strengthened, and we will strengthen it.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and thank Sir Kenneth Calman and his team for their excellent report. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on the swift and firm action that he has taken today, which is in contrast to the activities of Conservative Governments over the past 18 years. Will he confirm, however, that the report has not been watered down or toned down in any way as a result of the threat of legal action by one of the consultants concerned?

Mr. Dobson: I am not sure whether I am supposed to say this, but I will, because I think that the House is entitled to know.

We were challenged in the High Court by Dr. John Brennan on Friday, and both the chief medical officer and I agreed to three minor changes in the text of the report. As far as I could see, those changes did not really change the meaning of even the sentences in which they were included, let alone the general drift of the report; but that apparently satisfied Dr. Brennan, his lawyers and the judges, and I thought it better to agree to those three minor changes than not to present the report to the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I approve of both his concern for action to be taken, and the action that has been announced. It is important that we have in the national health service a standard of care that is enforced so that it is applicable across the country, and does not become a lottery that depends on where people live.

In that context, will the Secretary of State reassure us that the regional officers system of monitoring is the best? Would it not be worth considering the idea of a national inspectorate for services such as those that we are discussing, which could do its job wherever and whenever it was required to do so? Are we sure that we have enough radiographers and radiologists around the country, both in practice and in training? Are we sure that we have the resources not just to deal with routine screening, but to ensure that particularly vulnerable people are not missed in the efforts to deal with the volume of people who pass through the very desirable screening process?

Mr. Dobson: There are possible shortages of radiologists and radiographers, which will take a long time to address. We cannot just snatch radiographers out of the air. We will, however, do what we can to make available any resources that are necessary.

The small group of extremely expert people who were under the guidance of Dame Deirdre Hine considered whether local, regional or national quality assurance would be the best option, and came down firmly in favour of the regional option as being the most practical, and bringing the surveillance and monitoring as near as sensibly possible to the people actually doing the work. I am sure that everyone will want to consider that, but,

given the circumstances and the need to get on with things, I have told the national health service that it must adopt that option.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the speedy way in which he has reacted to a tragic and serious situation. The women who suffer from this killer disease—the real foot soldiers—realise that the situation exposes the stupidity of introducing an internal market in the national health service.

Can my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress of the pilot studies being conducted on bringing older women into the recall system? As my right hon. Friend knows, Age Concern and many other agencies representing older people are pressing for that and think that it would be worth while.

Mr. Dobson: I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend, who has done a great deal of sterling work in this sphere. The studies into the practicability and health gain from screening women over 65 are continuing, as are parallel studies about the merits or otherwise of screening younger women. I am not in a position to report on the state of progress on either of them.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South–West Surrey): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. As I was the Secretary of State who commissioned and began the implementation of the Calman report, I obviously take a special interest. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that, increasingly, the general public will be more demanding and discerning about quality assurance, and one of his challenges will be how he can deliver and meet that growing expectation. I urge him to visit the Jarvis centre in Guildford, a breast screening service of great excellence, and one of the early centres.

I detect an encouraging sign. With the delay in the publication of the right hon. Gentleman's White Paper, I note a softening of his approach towards NHS managers, whom he initially appeared to be regarding only with contempt. It seems that he is beginning to see that they have some merit.

Mr. Dobson: In answer to the right hon. Lady's final point, I have always been in favour of good managers in the national health service, who manage to the level that one might expect from the salaries that they receive. I applaud the good managers, but I do not applaud the mismanagement that went on or the Ministers who introduced a system that made it more and more difficult to manage quality assurance in breast cancer screening, as has been made obvious not by me but by Dame Deirdre Hine, the former chief medical officer for Wales.

The right hon. Lady asked about expectations, but we are not speaking about rising expectations. Women have been entitled to expect top-quality services in every part of the country and a system that spotted things that were going wrong and did something about them. We are talking about the failure of management, clinicians and politicians to deliver the standards that people could reasonably have expected in the past, let alone higher expectations in future. I have visited a number of breast screening centres, including the one in Cardiff which has been so brilliantly successful under the encouragement of Dame Deirdre Hine.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): I congratulate my right hon. Friend not only on the speedy and comprehensive way in which he has dealt with the specific cases in the south-west, but on the way in which money has been transferred to breast cancer care. He hits the core of the problem when he speaks about the internal market. Will he continue his deliberations on scrapping the internal market as quickly as possible? Will he say to hospital trusts that have the opportunity to merge and develop to stop sticking their feet out and put patient care first?

Mr. Dobson: We are progressing as quickly as we can with removing the internal market. In view of the failures of the lead purchaser system in relation to both cervical and breast cancer, we are reviewing the whole concept of lead purchasers in any part of the country, because, on the evidence that is available to us so far, it is not working.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South–West Devon): Given the level of anxiety about this matter in Devon, I thank the Secretary of State for the speed and, dare I say, decisiveness with which he has acted in this case. I hope that the suffering of women in the west country will not be used as an opportunity to score political points. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that should extra resources be needed to make the breast cancer unit at the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital a viable, efficient and successful unit, he will treat it as a priority and make sure that that excellent hospital receives extra resources?

Mr. Dobson: I am sure that any extra resources that are needed to make the hospital work properly can and will be found, but the general point is that to do things clinically badly and to manage things badly is frequently more expensive and more demanding on resources than doing them properly. If it can be done properly in other areas, it should be done properly in Exeter. I pay tribute to the relatively new chief executive in Exeter, who, as soon as this was drawn to her attention, started sorting it out, in marked contrast to her predecessors, some of whom have gone on to promotion in other parts of the NHS.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I thank my right hon. Friend for presenting the report, especially just after the end of a month in which breast cancer awareness has been at the top of the agenda—last week, I was happy to publicise that with women Members on both sides of the House. Does he agree that, in their lifetime, one in 12 women may be affected by breast cancer? Only recently, he opened the Jasmine centre at Doncaster royal infirmary, which shows the way ahead in dealing with the problem. It offers one-day, one-stop testing and diagnosis. That is how we should treat and deal with the problem for the 21st century. The centre has got off the ground only with money from this Government after the general election.

Mr. Dobson: I was very pleased to open the Jasmine centre, whose combined characteristics women would expect in these circumstances. It has state-of-the-art equipment, but it is also furnished, upholstered and generally laid out in a comfortable and homely way; much waiting and hanging about are involved in screening. It is, therefore, a place where people get the best of high-tech combined with tender loving care. That is what people want from the health service, not just for screening, but for everything else.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): We are grateful for the speed with which the report has been

[Mr. John Burnett]

produced. Did the inquiry or report address any possible conflict between consultants' duties and responsibilities to the NHS and their duties elsewhere, in the private sector?

Mr. Dobson: The report does not deal with that, so I cannot comment. All I can say is that what went on when the consultants were there was the problem, not what did not go on when they were not there.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the previous Government had three measures of success in the health service—the novelty of management techniques, the total amount of money that was spent and the total number of procedures that were carried out—to the almost complete neglect of the quality of service? We often find that, when more money is spent and more procedures are carried out, there is a proportional decrease in the quality of the service.

We are all grateful for what my right hon. Friend has said and for what he has done throughout his period as Secretary of State: he is putting the emphasis on quality and on the outcome of procedures. He must root out from the health service all the incompetence that is around. Of course, it is not universal—he rightly paid tribute to what is happening in Cardiff and elsewhere—but where there is poor-quality work and incompetence at the top and lower level in the health service, it becomes literally a matter of life or death.

Mr. Dobson: I agree with most of what my hon. Friend has said. Our White Paper aims to have an NHS that is geared to having quality standards and a system that delivers those standards. I am confident that we will be able to carry the clinical professions with us because they are showing much enthusiasm for the proposals that we are discussing with them before they go in the White Paper. It would appear that the only people who are not up to speed on what NHS patients and staff want are the official Opposition, whoever they may be.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I congratulate the Secretary of State on his very positive statement this afternoon. The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) said that breast cancer screening was a matter of life and death. Indeed it is.

The assurances that the right hon. Gentleman has given, following the failures in Exeter and Canterbury, will provide great reassurance to the women of this country, who rightly expect the national health service to provide them with the quality service that we all want, wherever we sit in the House.

The right hon. Gentleman announced a change in the system. Will he assure me that the new system, which I support, will be continually monitored to ensure that no further failures occur?

Mr. Dobson: We cannot ensure that no further failures occur in the clinics. Failures will occur from time to time, because it is not a precise science. We need a system that does not fail to pick up things that are going wrong. I am confident that the measures that we are putting in place at local, regional and national levels should deliver what the hon. Gentleman and I want.

Once again, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all his efforts over the years to sustain the national health service and work for top-quality services.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): In examining a tragic local problem, the Secretary of State has also identified much more comprehensive difficulties. It is clear from what he said that he intends to devote considerably more resources to, and place greater emphasis on, breast cancer screening. I welcome the extra resources for that area, where the staff involved are highly skilled. It is a stressful area, as I know because my wife works in it as a doctor. What extra costs will fall on the NHS, and from which budget will they come?

Mr. Dobson: At this moment, I am not promising any extra resources. I said that I want to change the system so that the present resources are deployed to greater effect and so that we produce top quality. If, in the end, people make a convincing case that they cannot do that without additional resources, I will be prepared to listen and see what I can do—but they will have to make a convincing case. As I said earlier, badly run places frequently cost more than well-run ones.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The terms of the Secretary of State's statement will give rise to obvious concerns about the quality and standards of breast cancer screening throughout the country.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to headlines in the report. Will he outline the proportionate difficulty experienced around the country by referring to the evidence in the report, rather than to the headlines derived from the evidence? In that way, those listening to his statement—as hon. Members will have done carefully—will be able to see the matter in its proper proportions.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the abolition of the internal market and the centralisation of quality assurance services. Does he agree that, for the time being, it remains the responsibility of purchasers to obtain those services on behalf of patients? Does it make sense for quality assurance to be separated from the purchasing function, as, to my mind, quality assurance and purchasing form part of the same function?

Mr. Dobson: On the hon. Gentleman's final point, there is a basic philosophical and management division of opinion. Unless I am misreading the Calman-Hine report, it suggests that it is probably best to separate the quality assurance function from the purchasing function. However, I am prepared to look carefully at that matter to determine whether the opposite case is more convincing.

In fact, quality assurance was not centralised; it was first balkanised and then virtually abandoned, so that there was no one in the system—nationally, regionally or locally—who had the responsibility, resources and authority to do anything about quality assurance. The split for breast cancer screening was introduced with the abolition of the regional health authorities.

WELSH AFFAIRS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee),

That the matter of North Wales and the Government's proposals for a Welsh Assembly, being a matter relating exclusively to Wales, be referred to the Welsh Grand Committee for its consideration.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Firearms (Amendment) Bill

Lords amendments considered.

After Clause 1

DISABLED PERSONS: EXEMPTION.

Lords amendment: No. 1, insert the following new clause—

DISABLED PERSONS: EXEMPTION

(".—(1) The authority of the Secretary of State is not required by virtue of section 5(1)(aba) of the 1968 Act for a person to whom subsection (2) applies to have in his possession or to purchase, acquire, sell or transfer a pistol chambered for .22 or smaller rim-fire cartridges if he is authorised under the Act to possess, purchase or acquire that weapon subject to a condition which complies with subsection (3) below.

(2) A person to whom this section applies shall be a registered disabled person who has a physical disability and is approved by the Secretary of State.

(3) A certificate granted under subsection (2) above shall be subject to the condition that—

(a) the weapon is stored and used only at premises designated by the Secretary of State; and

(b) possession of the weapon outside such designated premises shall be permitted only for transfer to and use at premises at which a shooting competition is taking place on such conditions as the Secretary of State shall specify.")

4.9 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

The Government are not prepared to allow exemptions to the general handgun prohibition proposed by the Bill. We considered very carefully before introducing the Bill, and reconsidered over the summer, whether there was any way in which we could allow pistol target shooting to continue for both disabled and able-bodied shooters. We concluded that there was not. Small-calibre pistols can be as lethal as those used by the killers at Dunblane and at Hungerford, and, in most cases, they would be just as easy to conceal by someone who is determined to perpetrate an outrage.

We have not avoided the Bill's consequences. We have made it clear from the start what the effect will be, and we have made no attempt to conceal that effect. The way in which the Bill affects disabled shooters is a regrettable consequence, but we thought that a total handgun ban was necessary in the interests of public safety. We accept that the exceptions to the ban that are already in the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, which are largely occupational, should remain. We do not accept, however, that any other group of shooters should be exempt from the ban.

During the Bill's passage, an equally plausible case has been made for other groups of shooters. There is no reason why any one of those groups is any more deserving than the others, and to allow exceptions for them all would make a nonsense of the handgun ban.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): I may have misheard what my hon. Friend the Minister said,

[Mr. Robin Corbett]

but perhaps he will clear the matter up. He is not saying that disabled shooters represent some threat to public safety, is he? Will he, please, take it on board that, because of their disabilities, many shooters with disabilities, and especially those who use wheelchairs, cannot use an alternative firearm, such as a shotgun or a rifle. That is the case that is being argued. Will he deal with that issue, please? Those shooters have no alternative way in which to continue shooting.

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend is right to say that I did not suggest that disabled shooters pose a threat to public safety. However, exemptions that would allow handgun ownership among members of the public, whether disabled or able-bodied, would drive a coach and horses through the Bill and pose a danger to public safety. That is precisely the point that I made. The point is not about individuals but about handgun availability and possession by members of the public.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I should like to make a slightly different point from that made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett). Did not the Minister just say that, in this matter, no group of people is more deserving than another? Is he not incorrect in saying that? Surely we must be concerned for the group mentioned by the hon. Member for Erdington: disabled people.

Pistol shooting is probably the only meaningful sport in which disabled people can participate and have any real social life. Will the Minister not examine that point very seriously, and agree that disabled shooters form a group that is very deserving, and more deserving than most other groups, if not all others?

Mr. Michael: As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Erdington, at issue is not the characteristics of the group of individuals but the possibility of creating an exemption that will leave handguns in the possession of individual members of the public. There is a danger.

In the last year for which full information is available, there were 398 incidents of theft of legally held handguns. In that year, therefore, there was more than one incident per day—sometimes involving more than one weapon—of guns going from legal to illegal possession. That figure should give pause for thought to anyone who thinks that it is safe to leave handguns in the possession of members of the public.

I make it clear that there is no attempt in the Bill to disadvantage disabled shooters particularly. Disabled shooters will be treated in the same manner as any other target shooters, and will still be able to shoot air weapons, shotguns or rifles.

New clause 2 proposes that disabled people should be able to shoot with small-calibre pistols, which is something that able-bodied people may not do. How would this work in practice? According to the amendment, only registered disabled persons with firearms certificates may use small-calibre pistols. This would cause particular problems for able-bodied supervisors and trainers who would be caught by the ban and unable actively to assist disabled shooters.

4.15 pm

As for rehabilitation, I accept that shooting may form an important part of the process, but I do not accept that that means that only handguns are suitable for the purpose. Other firearms may still be legally held and used by the disabled and others for therapeutic reasons.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I have here a letter from the Home Secretary to the British Paraplegic Shooting Association, in which the right hon. Gentleman also says that rifles may be used by disabled people. However, is the Minister aware that a person in a wheelchair would find it very difficult to use a target rifle, because, almost of necessity, one needs to lie on one's stomach to use such a weapon? It is possible to use a rest, but it is not so effective. For someone in a wheelchair, a pistol is easy to use, because one needs only one's hands.

Mr. Michael: The letter from which the hon. Gentleman quotes goes on to say:

"We have considered the points made in support of the two Lords amendments . . . very carefully indeed but remain of the view that it would be inconsistent to allow individual groups of shooters an exemption from the ban. To do so would undermine the principle embodied in the Bill that there should be a complete ban on handguns."

Before the hon. Gentleman intervened, I was about to develop the issue of security. If the firearms are to be stored at a designated site, they become a potential target for criminals. I will not go over the arguments we had about licensed pistol clubs in debates on the previous Bill, but there is a substantial risk of theft whenever a potential source of guns is created.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) *rose—*

Mr. Michael: I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman, but I hope that he will do me the courtesy of listening carefully to what I am saying in order to explain policy, rather than intervening in a manner that suggests that he is not listening to the strong case that I am making.

Mr. Grieve: I hope that I always listen to the Minister with courtesy. He raises the great fear of theft of .22 pistols. Is he aware—I think he is—that, if people wish to use .22 pistols for an illegal or nefarious purpose, they can purchase them across the counter in France and readily import them into this country, a process that is likely to be much easier for those wishing to perpetrate offences than breaking into a heavily guarded shooting club, which meets the exigencies of the Secretary of State?

Mr. Michael: I not sure that the hon. Gentleman is listening or has listened with care—his courtesy is not in question—to the arguments made in previous debates as well as in this one. There is a serious public danger in the private possession of handguns. That is precisely why the previous Government introduced legislation to ban larger-calibre handguns, and why this Government fulfilled an election pledge to give the House an opportunity to vote on the banning of .22 handguns. That danger is very real, as shown by the use of .22 handguns to kill people.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) raises the matter of illegally held handguns. It is certainly the Government's intention to do all they can to combat the

availability and possession of handguns, illegal and legal. However, it is a fact that legally held handguns were used at, for instance, Dunblane, which is why, before and after Lord Cullen's report, all the consideration was of how to deal with legally held handguns.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Surely the thrust of the Cullen report was that, in order to deal with the problem, weapons should not be held at home. We are now considering whether disabled people should have access to weapons held at secure centres because of the reasons that justify an exception being made for them.

Mr. Michael: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that point was widely considered in the debates on the legislation introduced by the previous Government and in the earlier discussions on this Bill. We strongly took the view—as did the previous Government—that such exemptions did not undermine the general principle that a ban on handguns was necessary.

The right hon. Gentleman is right about the contents of the Cullen report, but we reached the same conclusion as the previous Government—which was widely supported on both sides—that, in the interests of public safety, we should go further than Lord Cullen's recommendations. That remains our view. The amendment would unacceptably undermine the underlying principles of the Bill.

If the weapons are stored at a designated site, it becomes a potential target for criminals. We dealt with that issue in our debates on licensed pistol clubs when we considered the previous Bill. We must accept that there is a substantial risk of theft when a potential source of guns is created.

We are sorry that it has not been possible to find a way to allow cartridge target pistol shooting to continue. We considered the issue carefully before introducing the Bill, and we have reconsidered it over the summer. Our conclusion remains that a complete ban is the only safe option. I therefore ask the House to reject the amendment.

Mr. Beith: The Minister has advanced a case that many of us find worrying. We should be united on the deserving character of the disabled people to whom the amendment refers. If any exception is justified, surely we should consider this one. The Home Secretary's letter to the British Olympic Association, which was echoed by the Minister this afternoon, said:

> "It is very difficult to justify isolating one group of individuals, such as . . . disabled shooters".

I disagree. I do not think that it is difficult to justify isolating that group, because there are particular reasons why they cannot transfer as readily to another sport as able-bodied people can. If an exception can be made safely, there is a case for making it.

The Minister referred to the dangers of theft. The other exceptions that he has found necessary—mainly, but not entirely, occupational exceptions—involve handguns being held at home or in a workplace. If there is a risk of theft, it will lie more in those exceptions than in allowing guns to be held in special centres in limited numbers for the limited purpose and limited group of people specified in the amendment.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that there is a greater chance of small-calibre handguns being smuggled into this country from the continent, where they are freely available across the counter, than there is of a break-in at a centre of excellence, which would have to meet the safety standards laid down by the Secretary of State?

Mr. Beith: Indeed, attempting to break in to Bisley would be an inefficient way for a criminal to attempt to obtain a handgun. The amendment would allow the Secretary of State to set all the safety conditions to his satisfaction.

I do not want to enter into the wider arguments about the Bill. We are considering a specific exemption for a specific group. It is unreasonable of the Minister to argue that the danger of theft is so great. Using theft statistics based on the holding of handguns at home to argue against a system under which they would no longer be held at home is not reasonable. Although he separated his figures in the end, he included in his statistics thefts of guns already being held illegally. Thefts from private homes, however, which the Minister had in mind, cannot take place when guns can be held only in specified centres which meet conditions set by him.

Mr. Michael: Will the right hon. Gentleman explain his comments about not all stolen guns being legally held?

Mr. Beith: The Minister quoted figures for thefts of handguns, which I assumed included thefts of guns that were not legally held in the first place. If I heard him correctly, he seemed to separate out incidents of guns being stolen which had been legally held in the first place. Once the legislation is passed, it will not be possible to steal a legally held gun from someone's home, because guns will not be kept there—unless, of course, that person is covered by one of the other exemptions which the Minister has defended.

Mr. Michael: The right hon. Gentleman obviously misheard me. Can he explain his curious assumption that the figures I gave included handguns that were held illegally? Is he suggesting that people who held handguns illegally would wander into a police station and report their theft?

Mr. Beith: The police would come to know of guns that had been acquired illegally not because somebody reported them, but because, when they eventually caught up with someone who was holding guns illegally, they would trace where they had come from in the first place. I thought that that was why the Minister made a distinction in the figures.

The Minister is trying to dodge the main point, which is that it is not reasonable to use figures from a time when handguns could be held at home, and assume that they will apply when handguns cannot be held at home.

The amendment would not introduce a widespread exemption. The exemption relates to a small and particularly deserving group of people for whom it is not possible to transfer to other forms of shooting from which they can gain the same satisfaction and the same levels of skill.

The Bill is a free-vote issue throughout the House; my right hon. and hon. Friends certainly have a free vote. [*Laughter.*] I do not know why Conservative Members

[Mr. Beith]

are laughing. I assume that they have a free vote, and there is supposed to be a free vote for Labour Members. One or two Labour Members have spoken out with considerable independence during proceedings on the Bill on these and other aspects of it.

Even those of us who believe that a total ban is, in principle, desirable should realise that no ban can be total, as the Government themselves recognise. They have already made some exceptions on occupational grounds. I can think of no more deserving exception than the one proposed in the amendment for disabled people, given the strict conditions that have been set for its operation.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton. North): I want to deal first with the theft of handguns. I prefer to call them small firearms, because I do not like the term "handguns". I think that I heard the Minister say that 398 legally held weapons had been stolen. I find that figure difficult to accept, because I have seen the results of a survey done by the Metropolitan police a couple of years ago. They recovered more than 600 guns from criminals—people who were using them in the course of their trade. Only one of those 600 weapons had been licensed in the United Kingdom, and not by the individual who had used it to perpetrate his nefarious crimes. There is a great disparity between the two sets of figures. I believe that we should look at the matter a good deal more closely, rather than use such sloppy logic, which creates a dodgy base on which to pass any legislation.

In the other place, Lord Williams of Mostyn said that he did not want to single out the disabled, because he wanted to treat them like everyone else. That was most laudable, as far as it went, but can we say that disabled people are just like everyone else? The noble Lord went on to say that disabled people could take up another sport. Of course they could. I suppose that someone confined to a wheelchair could take up bingo, housey-housey or tombola, if he or she wanted to compete with able-bodied people.

Disabled shooters compete with able-bodied shooters. Let me ask hon. Members, regardless of party affiliation, how they felt on 2 May when they got the results that guaranteed either their return to the House or their introduction to it. Did they feel a degree of pride?

4.30 pm

When Daley Thompson or our ex-colleague Sebastian Coe stood on the rostrum to receive their medals, I am sure that they felt pride. Was that pride justified? Bob Everitt, the Welsh pistol champion, is severely disabled—he has only one arm—yet he is in the Great Britain able-bodied squad. He is in line to represent Great Britain or Wales—according to whether it is at the Olympics or the Commonwealth Games—and depending on the decisions that we make this afternoon.

Mr. Robathan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in respect of Mr. Everitt and people confined to wheelchairs, it was patronising in the extreme for the Home Secretary to write:

"rifles and shotguns . . . would, in the absence of . . . pistols, still be available for use by disabled people for . . . sporting purposes?"

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it was unfortunate, to put it mildly, for the Home Secretary to write in those terms?

Mr. Cook: I would rather do a body swerve to that question. Whether or not it is patronising, the hon. Gentleman has raised an important point.

The announcement was made when I was at the Labour party conference in Brighton. People said to me, "There you are, Frank. They have gathered them all in." I replied, "Yes, they have, but who have they gathered them from?" When they asked what I meant, I said that they had gathered in weapons from people who had complied with the law because they were law-abiding citizens.

That evening, I heard the television newscaster interviewing a police superintendent who said that people did not use handguns to rob banks or post offices—they used shotguns. He said, "Nobody would try to run off a security van with a .22 pistol. They would be out of their tiny minds." I thought, "Just a minute—we have an informed professional telling us that we are banning weapons that should not be banned and identifying shotguns."

What did that tell me? I am not a very clever person; I am quite simple really, but that does not mean that I am stupid. That policeman was talking about shotguns being the danger, and people are talking about that now. If the Minister tells me that a person in a wheelchair can use a rifle or a shotgun, I have to ask him, for how long and when will the next move be made?

To return to disability, what are we to say to Bob Everitt from Wales, and to Ian Horn, the European 1500 unclassified 1995 champion who won the expert silver medal in 1997 and has severe spinal injuries? Should we tell them to go and play golf or to have a game of five-a-side football in their spare time? Such people have worked for years and spent fortunes on specialist equipment and special weaponry—not the variety that is used on the street. It would be a waste of time a criminal carrying such a weapon.

Such disabled sportsmen have spent a lot of time, money and effort getting some tribute for this country. If we do not accept the Lords amendment, we are denying them that right. I do not think that we have the right to deny them that right.

A competition called the Pistol Anno Domini, in which disabled shooters used to take part, used to be held at Bisley—until legislation was introduced. Not only disabled shooters took part; each year there were 5,000 competitors—with their families—all of whom arrived with their pistols suitably boxed, cleaned, oiled and ready to take part in the competition. It was the biggest event of the year.

I would like the House to know how many police officers were required to supervise the competition each year. Does any hon. Member care to make a guess? The answer is: one. Does the House know why? There was one police officer because he was participating in the competition. There was not one official policeman on duty to supervise the event. That is the kind of threat that we are talking about quelling. That is the kind of sloppy logic that is being used.

How do we justify the sloppy logic? My guess is that the public opinion argument is used to justify it. I understood the surge of concern and anger when Thomas

Hamilton committed that barbaric act, bearing in mind that his first certificate was illegally held and that his initial weapon was illegally procured. Every subsequent deal was therefore ruled out under the law—if the police had taken the trouble to apply the law.

I could understand the public opinion. I, like everybody else, was sickened, just as I was sickened after Hungerford, when I and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) served for the Opposition on that travesty of a Bill, the Firearms (Amendment) Bill. We made a mess of the legislation then, and we are making a mess of it now. We have had a perfect opportunity to take the whole legislative framework relating to shooting and weaponry and make sense of it, and we have not done so. We are dealing with it in a piecemeal way, and that is foolish.

I return to the issue of public opinion, the driving force, the promises that were made and the media-driven propaganda that has been put out. I have the results of a MORI poll that was conducted between 24 and 26 October—so it does not have whiskers on it. The question asked was:

"Which, if any, of the following groups of people do you think should be excluded from a ban on small-calibre handguns and so be allowed to have them?"

The first group cited was:

"Supervised target shooting with .22 calibre pistols by disabled people in cases where it can be medically proven their disability means they cannot take part in other types of competitive sport."

I suggest that that relates directly to the Lords amendment.

Only 1 per cent. of those asked responded "Don't know", 5 per cent. responded "Depends"—it could depend on anything—and 56 per cent. said that the first group should be excluded from the ban. That is akin to the figure used in the newspaper today to justify Government support for the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill. I suggest that if 57 per cent. in a survey in the press is enough to support that measure, 56 per cent. in a survey on the street should be sufficient to support the amendment. I have other figures, which I will come to later because they relate to the other amendment.

I sympathise with the Minister, because he has been talked into a corner by members of his party and the Government. The inclusion of the disabled is unenforceable and unnecessary, and there is no justification for it. They will suffer a double condemnation, because they have worked so hard, done so well, and represented their country so well. They have brought back some national pride, which we seem sadly to be losing at the moment. I know that the Minister has problems, but I appeal to him not to oppose the Lords amendment for the sake of trying to make everybody the same. That is not justified, because everybody is not the same.

The Bill will stop me, as the captain of the Palace of Westminster rifle club, going elsewhere to shoot. In fact, the law of the land does not apply here. We do not abide by licensing rules in Crown buildings. The rifle club will continue because it is Black Rod's property. Once the ban applies, if I go elsewhere, I will have to do something like gymnastics. *[Interruption.]* I was trying to find out whether hon. Members were awake. It seems that they are, but only to the funny side.

The matter is not funny. People have worked hard to gain the pride that Daley Thompson and Seb Coe felt in competition, and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, felt when you were elected. I am sure that you were proud, as I was, that the people maintained their faith in you. There is a place for pride. Let us allow the disabled to keep it, for God's sake.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). No one in the House has fought harder for good sense in the legislation. His knowledge is unequalled and the research that he has undertaken has been magnificent. I regret only that the House is not prepared to listen to him.

I have been a Member of Parliament for some years, and I have seen legislation introduced as a knee-jerk reaction; the Bill is another example of such a reaction. It is extraordinary that people with a disability who have achieved excellence in shooting small-calibre handguns will be forced to go abroad to follow their interest in their sport. I share the anxiety of the hon. Member for Stockton, North about the Minister, who has been pushed into a corner. To say that the disabled must be treated like any other group is wrong.

The amendment makes it clear that the small-calibre handguns in question would be stored at and used only at the centres of excellence and would—as the British Olympic Association states in a letter to the Home Secretary—only be

"transferred to and used at premises at which . . . competition is taking place".

To suggest that the amendment would open up the centres of excellence to risk or make them vulnerable to people who might break in, as the Minister suggested, is stretching the imagination a bit too far.

4.45 pm

As I pointed out in an earlier intervention, it would be easier for someone who wished to carry out an offence with a small handgun to take a day trip to France to purchase it across the counter and bring it back. They would, of course, have to go through customs, but their chances of managing that are pretty good and it would be easier than breaking in to Bisley or one of the other centres of excellence.

The exemption for disabled people was added to the Bill in another place. My study of the voting on the amendment shows that support was found in all political parties, including the Labour party. The British Olympic Association also points out in its letter:

"The exemption for disabled people, who would be able to use such centres, is also important since cartridge pistol shooting is one of the few sports in which disabled people can take part"—

the next few words are important—

"on equal terms with able-bodied competitors.

Disabled people"—

as the Minister must be aware—

"are specifically presented with pistol shooting"—

as doctors and others will confirm—

"as a rehabilitation means to help with balance and confidence, primarily in the use of a wheelchair and sport."

That should be recognised and it is tragic that the Government are opposing a reasonable amendment to the Bill, which could be policed with a 100 per cent. chance of success.

[Mr. Nicholas Winterton]

As the hon. Member for Stockton, North said, the statistics gathered by the Metropolitan police show that only one weapon had been used in some 600-plus cases involving weapons. That is a telling statistic.

Mr. Frank Cook *rose—*

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I give way to the hon. Gentleman most willingly.

Mr. Cook: I must correct the hon. Gentleman. The Metropolitan police said that only one of the 600-plus weapons that they had taken from criminals had been licensed in the United Kingdom—and it had not been licensed by the perpetrator. All the weapons had probably been used.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, which makes my comments even more valid, since the Minister and his colleagues are not prepared to give credence to that important statistic. Facts speak louder than words, and the statistics cited by the hon. Gentleman should carry weight. It is tragic that this debate is not a debate at all, because people are not listening to the argument. If they were, the case put by the hon. Gentleman would carry weight with the Minister and he would accept the Lords amendment.

It has been said before that, although resisting the amendment may appear to be the brave option, the brave option would in truth be to listen to the good sense of the noble Lords who supported the amendment in another place and to the views expressed this afternoon in the Chamber, not least from the Government Benches. I plead with the Minister not to inflict on the disabled shooters of this country a total ban that will take away so much from their lives, making them less satisfactory and meaningful than in the past.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) in applauding the speech of the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), a doughty defender of the right of the bona fide citizens of this country to use licensed firearms. The House will not have been impressed by the justification given by the Minister for refusing to accept the amendment, and we must hear from him exactly how accepting the amendment would endanger the public.

The Minister stressed that the Government must do all they can to combat illegally held handguns, and the public will want to know specifically how he proposes to remove such handguns from society. He must give greater consideration to the amendment, which insists only that a tiny number of disadvantaged and disabled people be allowed to continue their sport.

It is a mean-spirited Government who cannot accept the argument so ably advanced by the hon. Member for Stockton, North and my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield. They, like me, cannot accept that a complete ban is the only safe option for the public. Other lethal weapons, which can be bought openly today without a licence, are perfectly capable of inflicting just as much damage as handguns, if not more. Home Office Ministers should pay attention to those weapons, rather than continuing with their mean-spirited measure to rub out a sport for people who cannot enjoy other sports and who suffer severe disability.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North talked about public opinion. We all know the history of the Bill—it has its origins in the Government's wish to respond to public opinion. However, the House is not here simply to respond to every whim of public opinion. We are here to defend the freedoms and the liberty of the British people. One cannot rub out at a stroke the rights, freedoms and liberties of British people to do things within the law, and changing the law in this respect is, in my opinion—an opinion shared by other hon. Members—quite wrong.

We know how we got here. "We must do everything we can to make safety paramount," says the Minister. Many years ago, when I was chairman of a local education authority, I laid the foundation stone for an infants school in Wolverhampton. Not many weeks after the awful events at Dunblane, a man ran amok at that school with a machete, causing anguish, pain and injury to young people and their parents in my home town of Wolverhampton. It is interesting that we are not talking about banning machetes. Events at that school, St. Luke's, showed that a machete in the hands of the wrong person is dangerous, just as a gun in the hands of the wrong person was dangerous at Dunblane. However, there has not been a reaction against machetes, knives and other dangerous weapons, as there has been against handguns.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North made the point that many of us suspect that this is the thin end of the wedge, and that, although the Government are intent on proscribing handguns at this stage, the time is fast approaching when they will introduce measures to ban all other firearms. The House must realise that that is the hidden agenda, and I wish to take this opportunity to make sure that that message goes out to the British people. We are in danger of misunderstanding what the Government are doing today. I repeat—rejecting the amendment is mean-spirited. In his winding-up speech, the Minister should tell the House how many handguns would be involved if this small section of society were allowed to continue their sport.

Mr. Robert Marshall-Andrews (Medway): This is something of a phenomenon: I intend to speak against the amendment, and it is unusual in this Parliament for a Labour Member to find himself in a tiny minority in the Chamber. I now know how Opposition Members feel every day.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) well knows, he and I take entirely opposite views on this important issue. He knows that well, because he knows that I have campaigned for many years for the total abolition of handguns. It was a matter of great joy to those of us who have campaigned on that issue when that abolition became a reality.

I have always listened with great respect to everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North has said, and I have immense respect for his statistical knowledge and views. I know that he respects my views, too. Those of us who have campaigned on this issue for many years know that the issue raised by the amendment is the only one that has given us serious pause for thought. We have no right to stop people's recreation—particularly if it leads to a recognition of the abilities of the disabled—unless to do so serves a greater good.

I have never found comfort in the statistical analysis of this matter, and I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) that the number of disabled people holding firearms is small. However, an important principle has been raised in this House. In banning handguns, the House set its face once and for all against the culture of handgun ownership. I refer not to the handguns themselves or to their number or to the numbers to be handed in but to the culture that lies behind the ownership of a weapon whose only designated purpose is the taking of human life. That is the basis on which the House has acted and will act.

I am speaking for two reasons. First, I want to make it clear why many of us will vote against the amendment. Secondly, while I know that I am in a small minority in the House, I am here to demonstrate that those of us who have campaigned on the issue are here to listen—

Mr. Corbett: I am certainly not arguing over the principle of the Bill, but will my hon. and learned Friend at least acknowledge that 999 of every 1,000 shooters who are to lose the right to hold handguns have alternatives available in the form of rifles and shotguns? The tiny proportion who are people with disabilities do not have that choice. They either take part in competition pistol shooting or they have to get out of the sport altogether. Can he persuade me, as the Minister has failed to do, that allowing that small group of disabled shooters the right to continue to take part in pistol shooting would represent any threat to public safety?

5 pm

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I entirely accept what my hon. Friend has said and I will say what I have, in effect, said already—we are faced with a matter of balance. I acknowledge immediately that, given the small number of handguns that would be held, the risk to public safety would be very small. That is not an issue. The importance of this measure is its cultural nature—setting one's face 100 per cent. against and saying that there are no exceptions to this law. As a sportsman, I take no pleasure in taking sport away from anyone, particularly from disabled people who have no other raft. That is why the matter has been strongly debated within the campaign of which I have been a part, and why the opposition that we are articulating is not meaningless.

Mr. Frank Cook: My hon. and learned Friend has pointed out that this is a cultural measure and that there can therefore be no exceptions. He says that that is so because of the nature of the weapon. Does it not then follow that rifles are in the same genre and that shotguns are the same? Is that to be the next cultural step? Will he give an honest response to that question?

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: I would not dream of giving my hon. Friend any other response under any circumstances. I will simply tell him this. There is a significant difference between the handgun and other forms of firearm. As he well knows, the handgun is the only weapon that has only one specific designation—the taking of human life. That is why those of us who have campaigned have campaigned against handguns alone. I can give my hon. Friend this assurance. Those of us who have campaigned in that way have no targets over and above the legislation that we are now pursuing.

Mr. Grieve: I listened carefully to the Minister of State, as he asked me to, and to the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews). The two views expressed point up neatly—we went over this when the Bill first came before the House—the fact that the Minister's position is irrational and untenable.

While the hon. and learned Member for Medway has attacked certain cultural values that he wants to suppress and to supplant with a new era of righteousness, which is at least comprehensible even though I find it abhorrent, the position of the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, as expressly spelled out over and again in earlier debates, was that this was a pragmatic move and that its every aspect was to be judged, not as an attempt to get at the gun culture—that had nothing to do with it—but to deal with specific problems. Yet a rational amendment from another place, which has no prospect beyond the absolutely minimal of increasing the risk to the public, is being rejected by the Minister of State, who is unable to give a reason. My only assumption is that his reason is that he is under pressure from hon. Members, such as the hon. and learned Member for Medway, but feels unable to admit it.

Let us try to apply a little common sense. First and foremost, there is not a blanket ban along the cultural lines that the hon. and learned Member for Medway wants. The armed forces and the police will retain the use of the weapons. The statistical evidence, which will be known to the Minister of State, is that there have been occasions in the past decade—very few—when weapons in the armed forces' possession have been stolen and misused. The same is true with the police. Indeed, I regret to say that there have even been instances when those weapons have been misused by members of the armed forces or the police. We cannot get away from such minimalism.

For reasons that I will not go over again as they are so coherent and cogent, the Lords amendment seeks to allow people who would not otherwise be able to do so to enjoy a legitimate sport. I detect that the hon. and learned Member for Medway is thinking, "Ah ha! But I do not like the cultural values underpinning it." However, it is no place of the House to look at people's cultural values. That is the same road that would take us to the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran—[*Laughter.*] It is precisely the same route, because, instead of judging matters on their merits, we would be judging them according to our own cultural values. In fairness, the Secretary of State and the Minister of State have consistently avoided that pitfall.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: As far as I am concerned, the hon. Gentleman has overstated his case.

Mr. Grieve: I do not think that I have. When I first came to the House, I listened carefully to Labour Members and, in particular, the Minister of State. I tried to fathom whether they were trying to act on objective or on emotional grounds—the latter is something that the House should be wary of doing. Although it may be a small step, I nevertheless consider that, when one starts to take such decisions without objective justification, it is the first step down the road to the Ayatollah Khomeini's

[Mr. Grieve]

Iran, because one is foisting one's own moral values on others when there are no objective grounds for doing so for the protection of others.

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that nearly 1 million people signed the Snowdrop campaign's petition, which asked the House to consider a ban on all handguns without any exceptions?

Mr. Grieve: I recognise that. As was said earlier, it is for the House to apply objective analysis and to ensure that people who may have strong emotions are nevertheless not allowed to dominate and remove the freedoms of others for no good reason.

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman seems to be in some doubt about the grounds on which the Government have approached these issues. They have done so coolly and clinically, judging what is in the best interests of public safety. I can assure him on that point.

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful, and I know that the Minister means that, because he and the Secretary of State have said it often. On that basis, his measure is completely and totally irrational. For that reason, the amendment should be accepted.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Our debate today brings to an end a long process, lasting more than a year and a half, aimed at strengthening our legal controls over the ownership and possession of handguns following the appalling tragedy at Dunblane in March last year.

Everyone in the House is agreed that such a shocking and horrific incident, in which so many young children and one of their teachers were so brutally murdered, must never happen again. We are united in our resolution to put in place the most appropriate measures to achieve that. In a moving speech, the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) again demonstrated this afternoon that people who shoot for sport feel as passionately and strongly about that as anyone else.

The process of reform on which we embarked all that time ago required a cool-headed and dispassionate examination of the risks posed by certain categories of handgun and the recognition that there are legitimate uses for some guns, but that the greater risk to society is posed by guns that are illegally held or easily obtained by criminals. Above all, there is the need to balance conflicting interests in a way that does not compromise public safety. Such considerations go to the heart of the amendment agreed to in another place, which we are now asked to consider.

Since the Dunblane tragedy, each one of us has had ample opportunity throughout the parliamentary process to express our personal point of view. The House will recall that, last summer, the Select Committee on Home Affairs, of which I was then a member, considered in some detail the existing framework of the law controlling the ownership and possession of handguns. The Committee took detailed evidence on how that framework might be improved.

It is now a matter of record that the Committee divided on party lines. Along with my Conservative colleagues, I took the view that a complete ban on all handguns was impracticable because there were various genuine and legitimate uses that posed no real threat to public safety. Even the Bill recognises the requirement that guns should be used, for example, in the course of animal welfare and husbandry.

Mr. Frank Cook: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will care to compare the views that were expressed during the sittings of the Select Committee with the recommendations that were published in Lord Cullen's report.

Mr. Greenway: I had not intended to do that. If the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, however, that there was a great deal more symmetry between what was proposed in the majority report and what Lord Cullen proposed, he is right. The previous Conservative Government and the new Labour Government have taken a much more stringent view than the one taken by Lord Cullen or the Select Committee on Home Affairs.

I took the view, as did my colleagues who were members of the Select Committee, that there were—and there remain—legitimate uses of handguns that pose no real threat to public safety. Time has already shown—and will show increasingly in future—that that was the correct judgment.

The sport of competition shooting, which is increasingly popular among disabled groups, was a use of pistols that we had in mind when recommending that an outright ban on all handguns was inappropriate. In our inquiry, we did not seek to differentiate between various categories of handgun, but we noted the destructive potential of recently developed high-calibre, multi-shot pistols.

The previous Government went beyond Lord Cullen's report, as the hon. Member for Stockton, North has said, and concluded that such high-powered, multi-shot, high-calibre weapons had no legitimate place in our society, but that the interests of shooting sportsmen could be accommodated by restricting the use of handguns to .22 calibre pistols kept only in the most secure gun club premises.

The two amendments passed in the other place at the instigation of senior Government Back-Bench peers, not of senior Conservative peers, show that the Conservative Government was entirely right to make such a distinction and that the new Labour Government's decision to seek legislative approval through the Bill for a blanket ban on all handguns is wrong.

An absolute ban is entirely indiscriminate in its application and as a consequence fails to recognise that there are circumstances in which handguns can and do have an honest and beneficial use which, properly regulated, poses no threat to public safety. Arguably there is no better example of this than the sport of competitive shooting by disabled sportsmen. To suggest that the genuine pursuit of their sport represents a danger or menace to the community at large is thoughtless, insensitive, insulting and offensive to the many disabled people who take part in competitive shooting, who have so successfully represented their country, for example, in the paralympics, and to all disabled people.

At the most recent paralympic championships in 1996, disabled shooters from Britain won gold and silver medals and set a new paralympic record. Medals have also been won in recent years by our disabled sportsmen in both the European championships and the world disabled shooting championships.

5.15 pm

Without the amendment, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for Britain to host paralympic championships in future. The host nation must be capable of staging all the events that make up the Olympic, games. The paralympics are parallel Olympics, and all the events must be capable of being staged. If pistol-shooting disciplines are excluded, how can Britain convince other countries of its ability to meet the staging requirement, and therefore host the games?

Pistol shooting is a popular sport for the disabled because it is practical and allows a disabled person to compete on more or less equal terms with the able-bodied in a way that is clearly impossible in most sports, which demand physical fitness. Pistol shooting can also have a considerable therapeutic effect—enabling, for example, someone rebuilding his life after a serious accident to improve his balance and co-ordination of hands, eye and bodily movements. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) made precisely that point.

Speaking in another place when introducing the amendment that is before us, Lord Howell—a much respected former Minister with responsibilities for sport—suggested that about 100 clubs belonging to the British Sports Association for the Disabled provide shooting facilities for people suffering from a wide range of disabilities, and not only those confined to wheelchairs. Also included are people who are deaf, or even blind, or those who have had limbs amputated or have restricted movement, for example. Some are disabled as a result of injuries sustained in serious accidents, and others have been disabled since birth.

Aided by the development of modern technology, shooting for the blind is a relatively recent phenomenon. I was surprised to hear that it was possible, but what a miraculous thing that it is. Only last year a blind team from Britain won a gold medal in the Dutch open disabled championships. Surely the House should endeavour to safeguard the pleasure and opportunity that pistol shooting brings to those less fortunate than us. That is the point that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) made in an intervention.

Some disabled shooters are able to take part in rifle and shotgun shooting for sport, but they are the exceptions. The House will appreciate that the recoil from a shotgun would make its use impossible for most disabled sportsmen. It is surprising, to say the least, that, when opposing the amendment on behalf of the Government in the other place, Lord Williams of Mostyn actively suggested that shotguns would be an appropriate alternative. It is such patronising ignorance of the practicalities involved that has offended many disabled people who shoot for sport.

In reality, for the vast majority, the problems of balance and physical strength and being confined to a wheelchair or having only one arm—the hon. Member for Stockton, North reminded us of Bob Everitt, the Welsh pistol champion—pistol shooting is eminently sensible, suitable and appropriate.

Ministers have argued that disabled shooters could find an alternative in air pistol shooting. That argument was made by Lord Williams of Mostyn in the other place. But where would they do this?

In practice, the Bill will close all pistol clubs in this country. Even clubs that provide rifle shooting are unlikely to survive, as the majority of members shoot pistols. The only solution is to provide, through the amendment, special arrangements to allow disabled pistol shooters to continue their sport, but subject only to the most stringent conditions.

Those who would qualify for exemption from the general ban on all handguns are closely defined in the amendment as those who do not just have a physical disability but are "registered disabled persons" under the criteria set out in the National Assistance Act 1948 and the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Scotland) Act 1972—not much room for doubt whom we are talking about.

More important, the exemption also provides strict measures of control. Shooters will have to be approved by the Secretary of State. What greater safeguard could there be than that? They will be able to shoot and use .22 calibre Olympic pistols only in designated premises, and possession of the weapons outside such premises would be permitted only under the strictest conditions, which the Secretary of State himself would specify.

Where is the risk of theft? As my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield said, it is more imagined than real. It suits the Government's arguments, but has no basis. Even under existing arrangements, there is not a shred of evidence that disabled shooters pose the slightest threat to the community. The rigid and exacting framework of controls contained in the amendment surely should remove any possible doubt that granting this exemption would compromise public safety.

Despite such overwhelming arguments, it seems from what we have heard today that the Government remain implacably opposed to granting any exemption to their preferred blanket ban on all handguns on—wait for it—a point of principle. Let us examine that argument a little more closely. Surely "principle" demands that Government be required to protect the interests of minority groups, let alone a group so vulnerable and deserving of our special dispensation as those with disabilities. By rejecting the amendment, the interests of one deserving minority are being set aside and crushed in pursuit of the interests of another.

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, after Hungerford, an opportunity was not taken, in the interests of safeguarding minority rights, and because of that we had Dunblane?

Mr. Greenway: If there are any lessons to be learned about the legislative changes that took place after Hungerford—in many respects they go to the heart of what we are considering today—it is that we concentrated far too much on deciding that certain weapons posed a greater danger than others and not enough on ensuring that the people who by their own actions, by their own behaviour, posed a threat. It is not the gun that kills—it is the person who pulls the trigger. The House has lost sight of that fact in many of our recent debates on these matters.

[Mr. Greenway]

As I was saying, by rejecting the amendment, the interests of one deserving minority will be set aside and crushed in pursuit of the interests of another. There is always a danger that, in seeking to respond positively to inevitable public demands for legislative action following such awful events as those at Dunblane, government will overstep the mark and go beyond what is necessary or justified. Just count how many amending Bills we have had in the 10 years that I have been here in which we have tried to put right mistakes made by knee-jerk reaction legislation.

For the community in Dunblane and the many thousands—a million was mentioned earlier; I do not know the exact figure, but I concede that it was a lot—who supported the Snowdrop campaign, which prompted the present Government to accept demands for a total ban on all handguns, such is their understandable sense of revulsion and concern that only a total ban will suffice. However, the backing of the wider public, mobilised by media comment, for the banning of all handguns was undeniably based on rather less conviction.

The most telling point today was made by the hon. Member for Stockton North, who said that a recent public opinion survey showed that 56 per cent. of people believe that it would be wrong for the ban to apply to disabled groups. I do not believe that public opinion would have been quite so apparently in favour of a complete ban if they had realised, for example, that people in wheelchairs, or blind sportsmen, would be denied their pleasure and sport. The House must seriously consider that matter when deciding how to treat the amendment.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews *rose—*

Mr. Frank Cook *rose—*

Mr. Greenway: I give way to the hon. Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews).

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: The hon. Gentleman asserts that the interests of one deserving minority are being crushed for the benefit of another. Will he define the other deserving minority whose benefits are being safeguarded?

Mr. Greenway: Yes—I have already made that clear. The point that I am making is that that is what the people who signed the Snowdrop campaign and those who called for a complete ban—to which the Government responded when in opposition—feel. From the many letters that I have received, and from much of the media comment that my Conservative colleagues and I on the Home Affairs Committee received as a result of our report last year, one would think that somehow we were evil because we stood in the way, as far as they were concerned, of a total ban. They concluded that, for them, only a total ban will do. My point is simply that if one accepts that, one equally accepts that the interests of another deserving minority—the disabled, people in wheelchairs, the blind, who shoot for sport, in all innocence—will be set at naught.

Mr. Frank Cook: The hon. Gentleman expressed interest in the 56 per cent. of the generous random sample who were supportive of the disabled still being able to participate in shooting sports with small weapons. He may be interested to know that supervised target shooting with .22 calibre pistols in shooting clubs for disabled or able-bodied was supported by 54 per cent.—only 2 per cent. less.

5.30 pm

Mr. Greenway: Doubtless we shall make use of that statistic when we consider Lords amendment No. 3.

As I said at the outset, any rational assessment of a ban on or prohibition of ownership and possession of handguns would have to provide for exemptions, and the Bill does that. It is the view of Opposition Members that protecting the interests of disabled people who take part in competition shooting should be one such exempt group. That is why their Lordships were right to agree this amendment, and why this House would be wrong to reject it.

It is not too late for Labour Members to save the day. The Labour manifesto promised them a free vote on whether to ban all handguns. Comments have been made about whether they will have a free vote, but as I do not receive the Labour Whip, and have no intention of doing so—

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Greenway: No, I am about to finish.

I have no intention of receiving the Labour Whip, but I understand that there may be a free vote. The crucial point is that free votes are always associated with matters of principle or conscience. This is a matter of principle. The principle is not that only a blanket ban will do, but that the interests of minorities should come before the interests of big government, dogma and plain pigheadedness. Supporting the amendment will not wreck the Bill, but voting against it and overturning it will wreck the interests of disabled people who shoot for sport.

Mr. Michael: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to begin by welcoming the fact that the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) reminded us of the unity of the House in our determination to do everything we can to prevent a repeat of the massacre at Dunblane. My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) reminded us of the plea of the Snowdrop campaigners, who put a passionate, rational and dignified case to the House and to the general public. That is how we should deal with these issues. I praised the hon. Gentleman for his opening remarks, but I was surprised by the rather hysterical ending to his speech.

There is no suggestion that disabled people are a danger, and the suggestion that our amendment is an affront to them is patently absurd. I welcome Conservative Members' interest in the rights of disabled people, because it was Labour Members who, over the years, defended the rights of the disabled when the Conservative Government failed to do so.

We have not lost sight of the culpability of a killer—the person whose finger pulls the trigger—in saying that it is important to remove the risks that are increased by the availability of handguns. That is what the legislation introduced by the previous Government and this Bill are all about.

The hon. Gentleman introduced another red herring when he referred to the Olympic games and the paraplegic Olympics. The Home Secretary and I have repeatedly reminded hon. Members of the powers of the Secretary of State in that respect, and I shall not go further than that, because they may be discussed when we consider later amendments.

Mr. Frank Cook: My hon. Friend made the point that legally certified weapons could be used for crime. Of course they could, if they were purloined by others. However, the police had some control over a proportion of the firearms that were held previously, whereas now they have no control at all because they are illegal. The effect of the Bill will be that that control will be removed.

Mr. Michael: I do not follow my hon. Friend's logic, because legally held handguns will no longer exist. A large number of them are no longer in the public domain: they are not in homes, or on the streets, because large-calibre handguns and a considerable number of a lower calibre have been handed in.

The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) suggested that the amendment deals with a limited number of people. It is not that simple. He also referred to the problem of pistols that have been smuggled in from abroad. The Government take that issue seriously, but we are not discussing that today. There is a big difference between security at Bisley, to which he referred, and storage and security at other gun clubs. In the past, guns were held in homes and thus were largely anonymous, whereas designated sites would be well known and thus more vulnerable. That issue was discussed more widely in earlier debates on the Bill.

In response to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, I must point out that the main problem with the amendment is that it would allow a number of guns to be stored at a site, which would make them a more attractive target for criminals.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield said that this legislation was a knee-jerk reaction. It is not. Although he made occasional references to disabled people, he returned to the arguments on the principle of the Bill. With respect to him and to the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), it is they who have failed to listen to the arguments for the Bill, whereas the Government have listened to and considered carefully and judiciously every argument that has been put to them.

The hon. Member for Ludlow spoke about rights and freedoms in relation to handguns, and he referred to machetes. We have a problem not just with machetes, but with knives generally, which is why we pressed for legislation, moved amendments to a series of Bills and succeeded in getting the Knives Act 1997 through Parliament and implemented it as quickly as we were able. The problem is that such implements have a purpose, whereas a pistol has two uses: target shooting, and to injure, maim or kill.

I take the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North very seriously indeed. I respect them, although I disagree with them. He cast doubt on the figures on the theft of handguns. They are authentic, because they come from chapter 3 of the 1995 "Criminal Statistics", which is in the Library.

I do not accept that this measure is the denial of a right: it is a limitation on a privilege that is allowed in law in the United Kingdom in specific circumstances. My hon. Friend argued with passion that we have been pushed into making our decisions. I disagree with him. When we saw the mess that was made after Hungerford, we thought long and hard before supporting the previous Government's legislation on large-calibre handguns, and going further, as we promised, to allow the House to decide to ban .22 handguns. Public opinion on the exclusion of groups from the ban was measured in terms of which group "if any", and I suggest that "if any" is a significant part of the question.

I think that my hon. Friend intended to be kind when he said that I had been talked into a corner on this matter. I assure him that I believe that there is every justification for banning .22 handguns and that there is no case for this exemption. I respect my hon. Friend's passion, but I think that he is wrong.

The hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) descended to insult and absurdity. I ask him to apply common sense. The use of handguns by the police and the armed forces is entirely different from the use by any group specifically for sport. We must be alert to the dangers of misuse by any individuals who are authorised by law to possess handguns, but there is a difference between those groups.

I agree with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews), who said that we are combating the culture of handguns. As a number of hon. Members have said, we must of course deal with illegal weapons and the wider culture of violence; but those issues are not before us today. What is before us today is an amendment that would cause problems for the legislation which received such overwhelming support from the House.

We remain of the view that it would be inconsistent to undermine the principle embodied in the Bill that there should be a complete ban on handguns. We consider that only a complete ban on handguns will provide the necessary degree of public safety. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have made that clear on a number of occasions. It is significant that there has not been the sort of representation from disabled people that would have been expected if the issue were as major as a number of those contributing to the debate have suggested. I believe that those contributions came from people who do not accept that the House has declared its will on the banning of .22 handguns. For that reason, the Government seek to overturn the amendment.

Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 291, Noes 155.

Division No. 77] **[5.40 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jennifer *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McLeish, Henry
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm

Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Clelland and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Golding, Mrs Llin
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hoey, Kate
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mactaggart, Fiona
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Cran and
Mr. Oliver Heald.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Clause 2

CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS AND APPEALS

Lords amendment: No. 2, in page 2, leave out lines 15 to 21.

Mr. Michael: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must inform the House that the amendment involves privilege.

Mr. Michael: The amendment will make the compensation arrangements for small-calibre pistols subject to the same affirmative resolution procedure as for the large-calibre scheme so that a draft of the scheme will need to be debated by both Houses before it can be formally made by the Secretary of State. The amendment was introduced on the recommendation of the Lords Select Committee on the Scrutiny of Delegated Powers and Deregulation. I ask the House to support the amendment.

Mr. Beith: I thank the Government for accepting an amendment which they showed such reluctance to accept during the debate in the other place. It is right that the House should have an opportunity to consider the compensation scheme on the basis of an affirmative resolution. We are glad that, in the end, the Government conceded the amendment.

Mr. Greenway: I was hoping to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We agree with the amendment, but I want to make a brief comment. My understanding is that the amendment was supported by the Opposition in the other place. We can agree on the amendment if on nothing else, because it clearly makes sense to have similarity of treatment.

Lords amendment agreed to [Special Entry].

After Clause 2

COMPETITION PISTOLS

Lords amendment: No. 3, to insert the following new clause—

" .—(1) The authority of the Secretary of State is not required by virtue of section 5(1)(aba) of the 1968 Act for a person to have in his possession or to purchase, acquire, sell or transfer a pistol chambered for .22 or smaller rim-fire cartridges if he is authorised under the Act to possess, purchase or acquire that weapon subject to a condition which complies with subsection (2) below.

(2) A certificate granted under subsection (1) above shall be subject to the condition that—

(a) the pistol is used for training in shooting disciplines approved by the International Olympic Committee for inclusion in the Olympic Games; and

(b) the pistol is used by a person approved by the Secretary of State and on the recommendation of a recognised governing body of the sport; and

(c) the weapon is stored and used only at premises designated by the Secretary of State; and

(d) possession of the weapon outside such designated premises shall be permitted only for transfer to and use at premises at which a shooting competition is taking place on such conditions as the Secretary of State shall specify."

6 pm

Mr. Michael: I beg to move, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment.

As I have said, we do not believe that a case can be made for exempting any group of target shooters. Again, I cannot support new clause 4, which would apply to competition shooters. There is no doubt that the Commonwealth games and any future Olympic or paralympic games could be held in this country. The hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) has sought to cast doubt on that. It does not do anyone any favours to suggest doubt where none exists.

As has been explained, both in the House and in another place, a contract has been signed for the 2002 games at Manchester. That can be broken only because of natural disaster or a lack of proper organisation. The Home Secretary can use his powers under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 to grant special dispensation to competitors to take part in shooting competitions in this country. Dispensation could be granted to any competitor, whether from this country or elsewhere.

We have already shown that those powers can be used successfully. In September, the Home Secretary granted his authority under section 5 to allow visiting overseas competitors to take part in the 14th European police and pistol championships at Bisley. In that instance, it was not necessary to grant authority to British competitors, as the competition took place before the 1997 Act came fully into force, and home competitors were able to shoot under their firearm certificates.

Nor do I accept that the passing of the Bill will mean that Britain will never again host an Olympic games. Provided that all the sports can be held—and, as I have just explained, they can be—there will be no difficulty in Britain bidding for future games. The British Olympic Association has said that it is not possible to predict accurately how great the impact will be on any future bid. Potential competitors might try to exploit the fact that a few of the sports were banned to our sports men and women, but that will be a small price to pay in the interests of the far greater priority of public safety.

It is not a prerequisite of the games that the host nation has to participate in all events. It is true that, in the past three Olympic games at least—Atlanta, Barcelona and Seoul—the host nation did compete in every event. However, in the last Olympic games, Britain did not compete in baseball, basketball, handball and softball. I do not know whether we would have teams ready for those events for any future games, but whether we did or not would not affect our ability to bid for future games.

It is important to remember that the Bill will affect just six of the 28 Commonwealth shooting competitions, three of the 15 Olympic shooting competitions, and two the 15 paralympic shooting competitions. That leaves a wide range of events in which British teams can take part. As I have said, we believe that, in the interests of public safety, a complete ban is the only safe option. That is why I ask the House to reject the amendment.

It may help the House to refer to the success of the three-month hand-in arrangements under the 1997 Act. Those arrangements ended on 30 September. From the latest information available, police forces in England, Wales and Scotland have received just over 142,000 handguns. Of those, nearly 116,000 were large-calibre handguns that were prohibited by the 1997 Act and 26,000 were small-calibre pistols which were handed in voluntarily. I have placed in the Library a detailed breakdown of those figures by forces.

Those are encouraging figures. Nevertheless, it may be worth adding some explanation. The original estimate of the number of legally permitted handguns—produced by police forces quickly and submitted as evidence for Lord Cullen's inquiry—was 200,490 in England, Wales and Scotland, of which approximately 160,000 were believed to have been large calibre. That number related only to certificate holders and not to dealers. No precise estimates of dealers' handgun stocks were produced, although, for the purpose of estimating costs, we assumed a notional figure of 10,000 nationally, which was based on a very small sample of forces.

The original estimates provided by forces are certainly maximum estimates, produced at short notice. Some forces will have inadvertently included among their estimates other lawfully held firearms such as rifles and shotguns. The figures would also have been distorted by forces using the number of handgun certificate holders who had been authorised to acquire or to possess, rather than the number who actually possessed, which is, of course, lower. Some forces may have included an estimate of their dealers' stocks.

The lack of accurate details from forces about numbers is also a consequence of the absence of any statutory requirement on certificate holders to notify forces of when a firearm is sold, transferred or otherwise disposed of. That weakness has been remedied since 1 October by sections 32 to 35 of the 1997 Act. The eventual setting up of a central database of firearms owners will enable such exercises to be conducted quickly and accurately.

There are further explanations for the difference in the estimate and the number of guns actually handed in. First, some handguns are being retained lawfully under the various exemptions allowed by the 1997 Act. Secondly, some certificate holders have taken their guns abroad and, in some cases, joined target shooting clubs abroad. Thirdly, since 21 September 1996, the Department of Trade and Industry has granted 3,455 small arms export licences, and each licence could apply to more than one firearm. Export licences are not required by individuals taking their firearms abroad for storage and use. Finally, the previous national amnesty was held in June 1996 and it is possible that some owners may have surrendered their weapons without wishing to await compensation.

Over coming weeks, forces are expected routinely to follow up each certificate holder recorded on their systems who has not been in touch with them. That double check by the police will establish cases of illegal possession.

Assuming that 40,000 remains the estimate of the number of small-calibre pistols, with 26,000 already handed in voluntarily, it is likely that no more than 14,000 pistols will still be lawfully held. I look forward to those further guns being removed as soon as possible. I hope that, after we have dealt with today's amendments, the Bill will proceed into legislation very quickly.

Mr. Beith: The amendment reminds me of a whimsical Flanders and Swann song, which extolled the virtues of the English, especially their somewhat lackadaisical attitude to sport, and which said of foreigners that they practised beforehand, which ruined the fun.

The object of the amendment is to allow British competitors to train and practise to the same high levels as people in other countries with whom they compete, which is now commonplace in all sports. The Bill would make that impossible, except if people went abroad to do so, which the Government seem, by their turn of phrase, almost to be encouraging. It is odd that, although the Government will make provision for these major events to be held when it is Britain's turn to hold them, British competitors will have to go abroad to train for them.

Mr. Frank Cook: Will the right hon. Gentleman call to mind the fact that the National Rifle Association was first formed and established at Wimbledon because we had sent shooters to South Africa, who had turned out to be so poor that they had to undertake tuition?

Mr. Beith: With his capacious knowledge of the subject, the hon. Gentleman further underlines the fact that we have moved on since the days of Flanders and Swann to an era where people think it right to train to proper standards for sports in which they are allowed to compete.

I recommended my right hon. and hon. Friends, who had a free vote, to support, if they could, the previous amendment, on the strongly, indeed passionately, held ground that we were doing a terrible disservice to disabled people not to make provision for them. My advice on this amendment is based much more on logic: it just does not seem reasonable that, having conceded that these events should be held in Britain, we have made no provision for our competitors to train in Britain.

On both the amendments, Ministers have argued that there is a total ban and that any modification we make will have the fatal effect of removing the totality of the ban. There is no total ban because exemptions are made for guns to be held for occupational purposes and because the Government have made, and said that they will make, exemptions, so that Olympic and Commonwealth competitions can be held in Britain. Therefore, we are not arguing about whether there is a total ban. All our debates are about what the exemptions should be.

I simply submit that it would be reasonable, given the House's determination not to allow any general availability of handguns, even in specially controlled and secure premises, to make some provision for British contestants to train in this country for sporting events, some of which will be held here. That is a reasonable plea, which would not in any way change the character of the ban—which, for the reasons I have given, cannot be a total ban and need not be so in this respect.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): I support everything said by the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). The amendment is reasonable and the House should support it. I opposed a total ban on guns because I felt that we should have given the Cullen report a great deal more thought. I also felt that it would do nothing to deal with the problem in my constituency—and, indeed, other constituencies—of the constant use of large numbers of illegally held weapons.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has visited my borough and spoken to many people in Lambeth. He has launched a one-month gun amnesty for Lambeth, which is currently under way. Clearly we must tackle the problem of illegal weapons, and my right hon. Friend is to be congratulated on his initiative—although, in fact, the amnesty was called for by the community, not by the police or the Government.

As the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed said, there is not a total ban; there are exceptions. Surely we should be able to make exceptions for our Olympic sports men and women—both able-bodied and disabled—so that they can practise their sport in safe surroundings, with all the very stringent conditions contained in the amendment, with the approval of specialist centres and the rules on the storage of weapons. Everything possible will be done to ensure that the weapons cannot be used illegally, so surely we are taking the Bill one step too far.

It could be made clear that the possession of weapons outside designated premises would not be allowed. We have all sorts of ways to enforce that. The British Olympic Association—a body not known for its radical thinking—would not support the amendment if it did not believe that it could make the system work.

People talk about shooters going abroad to practise, but we should not forget that there is still a part of the United Kingdom where target shooting will continue to be allowed—Northern Ireland, which is exempt from the Bill. Presumably many Northern Ireland people will now become part of the British Olympic target shooting team because it will be the only place where people can practise. In fact, therefore, people will not have to go abroad because they can go to Northern Ireland—which shows the anomalies in the Bill.

Mr. George Stevenson (Stoke-on-Trent, South): They could go to the Channel islands as well.

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is right.

I appeal to the Minister not to get hung up on this fetish about not allowing any exceptions. There is a perfectly legitimate exception that could be monitored and scrutinised, and which would give our Olympic sports men and women the opportunity to compete properly, rather than going into a competition with their hands tied behind their backs. I hope that the House will think about the issue and not just go along with what has seemed, from the beginning, to be a feeling that, if we did not support a total ban, we would be evil people. I do not think that I am an evil person. I have never supported a

[Kate Hoey]

total ban, and I certainly do not think that we shall feel proud of this measure if we allow it to get on the statute book.

Mr. Robathan: The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) is not an evil person. She shows a great deal of logical thinking, and certainly more than some of her Front-Bench colleagues.

This is the final debate on the Bill, if everything goes according to Government plans, which is likely. Therefore, today we are witnessing the annihilation of pistol shooting as a sport. I regret that; indeed, I regret the whole history of the issue, including the previous Government's decision to go further than the Cullen recommendations. I especially regret what is happening now, because it is mean-minded and in the spirit of a nanny state.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook)—I hope that I am not stealing his thunder—said that the National Rifle Association was set up after the Boer war because our so-called sharpshooters were so hopeless. I hope that we will not be in a similar position when we need highly trained soldiers who can fire rifles. It is bizarre that we should be preventing perfectly harmless people from continuing with a perfectly harmless sport.

6.15 pm

The Bill is illogical. The Home Secretary's letter to the British Olympic Association, a copy of which I received this morning, said that competitors could go abroad to practise. His exacts words were:

"Dispensation could be granted to any competitors"—

that is, in pistol shooting—

"to shoot in Britain at something like the Manchester Olympics, although British competitors would have to train elsewhere."

That is an extraordinary, twisted logic and, frankly, the right hon. Gentleman should regret that. This is an awful measure, which is being defended by awful logic.

Mr. Frank Cook: This will be the last debate on the Bill. From here, it will go to the other place, and that will be the last that we see of it until it is placed firmly on the statute book. For that reason, I am most grateful that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, showed leniency in allowing the Minister to tell us about the number of weapons that had been handed in—something not strictly in accordance with the amendment under discussion.

It is a great pity that you were not asked to show the same leniency in our attempt to find out about the payment of compensation for weapons that have been handed in. I am getting a huge amount of correspondence from people who, having complied with the law, are sick and tired of waiting for the payment to which they feel entitled and which they were led to believe they would get. They are still led to believe that they will get it, but they do not know when.

Mr. Michael: We have always said that it would be problematic to deal with the number of claims involved, and that the process would take some time. We said that we would deal with the claims as quickly as possible, but that it was impossible to set a deadline. The civil servants and police involved are making great efforts to expedite the process, and that will continue to be the case.

Mr. Cook: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that explanation. However, I feel compelled to remind him that the timetable for handing in weapons was set by the Government—indeed, by both the previous Government and this Government. Surely any hand-in timetable should take account of assessing the value and handing over the cash. It is not sufficient to say, "We have a difficult job." We know that—it was a difficult job that was thought about in the first place, but not for long enough.

Mr. Michael: With respect to my hon. Friend, it was the will of the House during the previous Parliament that the process should apply to large-calibre handguns. The House willed a difficult job to be done. In my view, it has been done well by the police and others. Of course, many claims and assessments have to be dealt with, but we spelled that out when the Bill was before the House and when the order was laid earlier this year. It is something of a diversion to come back to us about a delay, when that delay has always been predicted because of the size of the job to be done.

Mr. Cook: I simply repeat that any timetable for handing in should have taken account of the process of valuation and handing across any compensation. To my mind, those are simple considerations—but I am a simple person.

My hon. Friend the Minister of State paid tribute to my passion and beliefs, but he went on to say, "But he is wrong." He never tells me why I am wrong. It is useless for me to offer arguments and what I consider to be logic if no one offers me the "anti-logic", thereby loosening my opinions and convincing me of the righteousness of the legislation. Currently, I cannot discern that righteousness.

Mr. Michael: I accept that, at least most of the time, my hon. Friend tries coolly and reasonably to explain his viewpoint, and I do the same. I think that I have offered him sense and logic on each of the arguments that he and I have exchanged. The simple fact is that he does not agree with me, and I do not agree with him.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend has tempted me to put him to the test. When I raised the issue of Olympic and Commonwealth games, he told me that he had had consultations with the associations and that there was no problem. I believed him. I am not suggesting for one moment that he told me an untruth; he may well have thought that he was accurately informing me. If the information was accurate then, however, the situation has changed a bit since.

On 24 October 1997, I received from the British Olympic Association the only circular that I have received on shooting issues. It may interest hon. Members to know that I have three filing cabinet drawers crammed to the gunnels—not neatly filed in fanfold order, but packed full—with correspondence on firearms legislation. My colleagues sometimes tell me that they are receiving a heavy mail, but I promise the House that I know how heavy the mail can be.

How many of those letters—all of which were individually written—expressed disagreement with my stance? Of three drawers full of letters. only five letters

disagree with my stance. The circular from the British Olympic Association is addressed to all Labour Members. I will not read the entire letter, but it states:

"We are writing to ask your help . . .

The amendment would enable our .22 Olympic pistol shooters to train and compete for international competitions in established Centres of Excellence and avoid the embarrassing situation at the Manchester Games 2002 whereby English, Scottish and Welsh competitors will be able to take part but not train for the .22 pistol events. The safeguards contained in the amendment are absolute. The Centres of Excellence would be approved by the Secretary of State as secure sites. The shooters would be vetted by the Chief Constable,"—

I hope a little better than they were in Dunblane—

"would then be vetted and recommended by the governing bodies of the Olympic sport and finally, would need the special approval of the Secretary of State. Furthermore, the .22 Olympic pistols would be stored and used at the Centres of Excellence, only being transferred to and used at premises at which a shooting competition is taking place during an Olympic or Commonwealth Games."

The letter expresses the British Olympic Association's current attitude, which varies considerably from the impression that was given to me by the Minister in previous debates in the House.

I do not want to sound as if I am booting the Minister, because I am not. He was very helpful when the European 1500 championship, which is a pan-European competition, was held at Bisley. As we were getting very close to the date of the competition, there was some doubt about whether it could be held. People were coming from the Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium and Norway, and from heaven knows where else, but no one knew whether the competition would be held.

During the summer recess, I approached my hon. Friend the Minister, and he was very kind. He telephoned me from his home, we discussed the problem, and he very diligently applied himself to finding a solution. He said, "We will grant a dispensation." Nevertheless, the situation provided an example of the United Kingdom hosting an international competition to which outside shooters brought their weapons so that they could participate, whereas the Brits were rather half in and half out of the competition.

Half the British shooters had retained their .22s, because the date to surrender them had not yet arrived, whereas the other half—who were extra-law-abiding—had handed in their weapons early. Some very good competitors who normally participate in such events had weapons, but some very good competitors who normally participate in such events and represent their country had no weapons. The question inevitably arose whether competitors without weapons would be able to borrow weapons from those who had them. As helpful as the Minister had been with the overall event—which could then take place—he was unable to grant a dispensation to those who had already handed in their weapons.

The event was something of a debacle. Some of our best shooters were without their best weaponry, whereas other shooters—who are probably just as good as our best shooters—were demoralised because their team had been carved up. I suggest that that event provides a technical example of what might happen in future Commonwealth and Olympic games.

The House has already talked about pride, and I have mentioned the pride of people winning elections. I mentioned Daley Thompson and Sebastian Coe. Many British pistol, rifle and shotgun shooters have brought home the gold and the silver, and we were very proud to welcome them and poured praise on their heads for holding up the flag. Now, however, we are in the crazy situation of saying, "You can take part in a shooting event, as long as you bugger off to the continent or somewhere else to train for it. And don't forget to bring back your stuff." Such a situation is apparently justified by public opinion.

In the debate on Lords amendment No. 1, I quoted from a MORI poll. Unsurprisingly, the same poll questioned public attitudes towards shooting in Olympic and Commonwealth games. As I said, 54 per cent. of the generous sample of people questioned agreed that

"Supervised target shooting with .22 calibre pistols in shooting clubs for able-bodied or disabled people"

should be permitted.

Moreover, 56 per cent. of those asked agreed that

"Supervised target shooting with .22 calibre pistols by disabled people in cases where it can be medically proven their disability means they cannot take part in other types of competitive sport"

should be excluded from the ban. Of those questioned, 61 per cent. thought that

"Supervised training sessions with .22 calibre pistols by the British teams (able bodied and disabled) for the Commonwealth and Olympic games, and other similar events"

should be excluded from the ban. That is public opinion—based on a random, scientifically compiled sample—as recently as last week.

Many competitors have had to relinquish their preferred weapon—some of which were custom-made and cost anything from £2,500 to £6,000 each, which is not the type of weapon that the ordinary Jack the lad would use in trying to knock off a post office—and resort to black powder shooting as a form of competition.

I shall quickly explain what black powder shooting involves. It means putting a cap on the end of a combustion chamber, filling the chamber with a form of black powder—very carefully measured—tamping it down with a waxed wad and inserting a ball shot. It then involves shooting at a target—people want to do no more than they did before—to put a hole in a piece of card at a distance of about 25 m. That is the sport of target shooting and that is how dangerous it is—and it is supervised.

6.30 pm

I know how long it takes to load such a weapon, because I did it at Bisley during the Trafalgar meeting three weeks ago. It takes a long time, but I am told that Laura Collins of *The Sun*, who had no official range licence, who was not licensed to use a section 1 firearm and who therefore held the gun illegally, apparently used one to shoot at a melon. Her article tells how quickly she was able to load the gun, but that has to be an untruth. Furthermore, the melon at which she pointed the gun was an unlicensed target—*[Laughter.]* It may sound funny, but a melon is an illegal target—one can use only authorised targets. We ought to find this a serious matter and not be facetious.

I am talking about someone who broke the law. Indeed, she was not the only one who broke the law. So did the person who lent her the weapon to perform the foul deed, and her editor, who was either an accessory before the fact, in instructing her to perform the deed, or an accessory after the fact, in allowing her to report it.

[Mr. Cook]

There is no doubt—*[Interruption.]* I thought that someone was calling time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It does not help our proceedings if audible devices are brought into the Chamber.

Mr. Cook: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I promise you that my phone is switched off. It was not me, but I am unable to declare who was responsible for the interruption.

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): It was someone on the Opposition side.

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend says that it was someone on the other side, which reminds me of something that happened earlier this afternoon and which graphically illustrates the sad state we are in with this legislation. Much earlier today, one of my hon. Friends said, "Frank, I realise that we are on opposite sides in this matter, but how long are you going to take?" That person is not in the Chamber now. I thought that it was rather sad, as I am on the side of the disabled and of the sportsman.

I am also on the side of law and order. The reporter to whom I referred broke the law, but she was paid by an editor who allowed and probably encouraged her. I should like to know what the Home Office did about it, whether any charges have been preferred and whether any action is to be taken; because it is unfair to apply the law so stringently to people who have very little defence and who have been willing to be compliant but allow others to parade and publicise their law-breaking activities in a national newspaper.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I shall be very brief. I was not in the Chamber for the debate on the previous amendment because of Select Committee business, so I do not know how many Labour Members were present to put their boot into the disabled. However, I notice that very few are here now to explain why we do not trust those of our compatriots whose ability is such that they are capable of representing their country at their chosen sport.

One of my favourite quotations comes from Sir Winston Churchill in his "Life of the Duke of Marlborough". He said of the Margrave of Baden that his military epitaph for all time must be that the two greatest captains of his age thought his absence from a crucial field well worth 15,000 men.

Mr. Michael: As these remarks go on the record in *Hansard*, I must in fairness point out to the right hon. Gentleman that there are more Labour Members here than Conservative Members.

Mr. Brooke: The Minister is perfectly capable of doing that arithmetic, as I am, but he also knows what proportion of Labour Members are present and what proportion voted in the Division.

I listened to the Minister's reference to a complete ban. Foreigners in competition are excepted from that ban and are thus treated and trusted above our own people. When I was elected to the House, I never thought that I would sit here and hear the Government argue such a proposition. Nevertheless, I have chosen to be present on this occasion because of my sense of embarrassment and guilt at such a proposition coming from the Government.

Mrs. McGuire: I had not intended to speak, but, having listened to what has been said, I should like to make a few comments in view of the fact that this will, we hope, be the last occasion that we discuss firearms for a long time.

I have heard a great deal this afternoon about random samples and unlicensed targets. The children of Dunblane were unlicensed targets—

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): That is a cheap comment.

Mrs. McGuire: It is not a cheap comment. I ask the hon. Gentleman to come and say that in the small city of Dunblane in my constituency.

Mr. Gray: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. McGuire: No, I will not give way.

Mr. Gray: I come from Dunblane.

Mrs. McGuire: I represent the people of Dunblane.

This is the final part of the chapter that will deal with the gun culture in our communities. We have heard much about the liberty of individual groups and about exceptions. The history of the past 100 years or so is littered with instances of individual liberties having to be restrained so that the unfettered pursuit of happiness was not undertaken at the expense of other people. Yes, it is unfortunate that Olympic sportspersons cannot take up shooting, but they still have their life choices.

According to the opinion polls, 54 per cent. of people believe that the sport of shooting should continue. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) might think this is a cheap comment, but if we conducted an opinion poll in Hungerford, 100 per cent. of the people there would ask for a total ban on handguns. I know that 100 per cent. of the children and parents of Dunblane would ask for the same.

The Snowdrop campaign galvanised opinion in this country, and it is incumbent on the House to see the end of the chapter through this evening and reject the amendment. We must recognise that the liberty of the children of Dunblane and that of the people of Hungerford is far more important than the pursuit of any gold medal in the Olympic games.

Mr. Grieve: I wish to pick up just one point at this stage of the debate. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully and then reply, so that I can understand the reasons behind the approach that he has taken.

Let us forget for a moment whether the people coming to compete in this country are foreign or not. The fact is that, having applied their mind to the matter, the Government have decided that it is proper to make an exception to allow certain members of the public—members of the public who, by virtue of being foreign,

will never have been vetted for a firearms licence—to come to this country and use a .22 pistol for competition purposes. I am sure that the Minister will readily agree that he cannot wholly eliminate the possibility that that firearm might be misused. Somebody might go berserk—someone of whose record we have no knowledge.

The Government have decided, on balance, that that is allowable. That is different from the position of the hon. Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) or the hon. and learned Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall–Andrews). In that case, why does the Minister not deem it allowable for Olympic sportsmen to train in this country? There can be no justification for the Government's position. The Minister has come off the moral high ground—from what he said earlier, he was never on it—down to pragmatism, so he must be judged pragmatically on his proposals.

The amendment would introduce a simple, logical exception, just like the exception requested for the disabled. Will the Minister please explain why it cannot be allowed? I can see no logical grounds for the Government's decision, in view of the position that they have adopted.

Mr. Greenway: As I said on amendment No. 1, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) made it clear when the previous Government introduced the Firearms (Amendment) Bill in November last year that one of the key objectives was to protect the interests of British sportsmen who compete in pistol shooting in international championships such as the Olympics and the Commonwealth games. That was supported by the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Some .32 calibre pistols have been used in Commonwealth games competitions, but the low-calibre .22 pistol has been traditional in Olympic pistol shooting. Target shooting with high-calibre handguns was removed from Olympic competition because those guns were recognised as more dangerous. The amendment would give British pistol shooting competitors the opportunity to practise in Britain for international competition by creating centres of excellence. The plans would require the granting of a certificate, subject to the most stringent conditions.

Such arrangements are vital. If the amendment is overturned, our pistol shooting sportsmen will have to go abroad or to Northern Ireland to train. In practice, they will be banned from international shooting competitions in the country that invented the sport of pistol shooting more than 100 years ago, and has dominated the sport ever since. It has been one of our sporting success stories for a long time. In the past 10 years, British competitors have won 23 medals in Commonwealth games.

As hon. Members know, the next but one Commonwealth games will be held in Manchester in 2002. The Home Secretary has made clear—the Minister repeated it this evening—his intention to use his powers under section 5 of the Firearms Act 1968 to grant the special dispensations needed to allow competitors to take part in those games, but there are no provisions to allow our pistol shooting competitors to train in this country before those games.

In a letter of 27 October to the chief executive of the British Olympic Association—a letter to which my hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) referred—the Home Secretary acknowledged that, while a dispensation could be granted to any competitor, British competitors would have to train elsewhere. What a ridiculous state of affairs!

Usually a Government stumble into such a mess by accident, but not this time. In the aforementioned letter, the Home Secretary stated:

> "We have recognised since the introduction of the Bill, and made clear in Parliament, that the effect of the Bill will be that British competitors will no longer be able to train in this country."

Let there be no doubt—that was the intention all along. Foreign competitors can compete here, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said a moment ago, so why cannot British competitors be allowed to train here?

The Government appear not to care about the interests of British competitors in international pistol shooting championships. Ministers have repeatedly been asked—including tonight—to demonstrate how and why those sportsmen pose a threat to public safety. They have been unable to do so, because no evidence exists.

6.45 pm

The amendment would give the Secretary of State absolute control over who could use the shooting centres, and would add further controls by requiring that any applicant must first earn the recommendation of the governing bodies for competitive target shooting in the United Kingdom. The .22 calibre pistols would also have to be stored and used at premises designated by the Home Secretary.

Surely those safeguards guarantee that the special secure centres will be used only by genuine sportsmen, as recognised by the Home Secretary. Such arrangements have been successfully introduced in Japan to ensure public safety, which is our aim. The Government are usually keen to bring best practice from overseas to Britain, but not on this occasion.

Surely the Government can consider the controls needed on legitimate sportsmen who give up their time to practise to win medals and bring honour and prestige to this country in Olympic competition to be different from those required for public safety. The Government are driven by dogma, for the reasons that we have heard today. They are opposed to any exemptions to a total ban on the grounds, we are told, of principle, and in the mistaken belief that only a complete ban will provide the necessary safety for the public.

That might be a more understandable point of view if a total ban would comprehensively rid society of all handguns, but that is clearly unachievable. However much effort the police, customs and courts put into tackling the problems of illegally held firearms, handguns can easily be obtained illegally, not just on the nearby continent, but among the criminal fraternity in this country.

Firearms amnesties have been successful. The majority of previously legally held large-calibre handguns, banned by the legislation passed by Parliament earlier this year, have been surrendered, as the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) said. There is no reason to doubt that the ban on .22 calibre pistols will not be similarly respected by the law-abiding majority, however much they disagree with it.

[Mr. Greenway]

Surely the enforced surrender of .22 calibre pistols by our international shooting sportsmen will make a difference to public safety only if those giving up their guns pose a threat to the community. They pose no threat, and no evidence of such a threat has been forthcoming.

Surely the Government's refusal to accept the amendment must be justified on the ground of public safety and not simply on a point of principle. It is a poor principle that imposes burdens and restrictions on people for no good reason except to appear unyielding. I am sure that those who have listened to our debate this evening agree that we have heard no such justification from the Minister.

If the issue of principle has any real bearing on the matter, it surely points in the opposite direction from the one taken by the Government. English law has always followed the general tenet that everything is permitted unless the public interest demands its prohibition. The Government have failed miserably to show why competition shooting poses such a threat to the community that its complete suppression is warranted. If the amendment is defeated, the Bill will go completely against the grain of every principle on which our law generally has been established.

Conservative Members have concluded that the Government's stand on the matter tells us rather more about their character than it does about any sensible, coherent attitude towards gun control. Minority interests simply do not count if, as in this case, they get in the way of the Government's declared intentions, no matter how much their policy objectives are shown to be unnecessary and distinctly unfair.

Increasingly, the Government appear bossy, dictatorial, authoritarian and tyrannical. Any of their Back Benchers who have different points of view are sidelined or silenced. That is true whether we are talking about a referendum on a Welsh Assembly, tuition fees for university students, cold weather payments, the tax on pension funds, the withdrawal of tax relief on medical insurance for pensioners, or assisted places for working-class children in private schools. If the Government do not agree with people, they may as well save their breath, for all the notice the Government will take.

As the hon. Member for Stockton, North has shown, public support for a complete ban is already waning. Let us make no mistake: unless action is taken along the lines suggested in the amendment, the issue will return to haunt the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary when it becomes increasingly obvious that, by their stubborn refusal to compromise and their high-handed and dismissive attitude towards the views and interests of others, they have single-handedly confined our pistol competitors to the third division of also-rans in international shooting competition.

What will happen when Britain bids to hold a future Olympic games? The answer is obvious. It is all very well for the Minister to say that dispensations are available. Other countries will use the ridiculous ban on pistol shooting to undermine the British case. It is an absolute gift. That is not my view, but the view expressed by Lord Howell, a much-respected former Minister with responsibility for sport, when he supported the amendment in another place. He said:

"There is no doubt in my mind that if we cannot say that at an Olympic shooting event British shooters will compete on equal terms with everyone else, that will be held against us."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 16 October 1997; Vol. 582, c. 589.]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not quote non-ministerial Members of the other place.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for that reminder.

The House must recognise that there are senior members of the Labour party who have great experience of negotiating to bring international competitions to this country and who express their views in no uncertain terms. Their arguments are compelling. They have explained that it is not enough simply to say that there will be a dispensation. The real issue is that, in view of the way things work in such negotiations, our attempts to bring prestigious games to this country will be undermined. That view will become increasingly common. The Government are keen that we should host the Olympic games in future. When they try to do so, they will come up against the problems I have outlined.

That point leads me to ask what the Minister for Sport intends to do. How will he vote tonight? Will he agree with Lord Howell, the former Minister, who backed the amendment in another place?

Mr. Beith: Is he here?

Mr. Greenway: The right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) steals my thunder by asking whether the Minister for Sport is even here. Will he be here for the vote? We shall have to check the voting record in tomorrow's *Hansard*.

This is a bipartisan issue. More than one former Minister for Sport in the other place clearly supports the amendment. My noble Friend Lord Moynihan joined forces with Lord Howell to ensure that the amendment was passed in the other place. *[Interruption.]* Colleagues may barrack. I suspect that history will show that the two former Ministers for Sport, Lord Howell and Lord Moynihan, have performed rather better in their task than the present Minister for Sport, who, in his own words, regards himself as something of a bar-room sage. Where does he stand on the amendment?

We can begin to conjecture about what will happen in the run-up to the Commonwealth games—not in 2002, but next year when they will be held in Kuala Lumpur—or about what will happen in the Olympics in Sydney in 2000. Our pistol-shooting competitors will not be able to train or prepare in the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Stockton, North used the word "embarrassment". I can see *The Sun* editorial now. It will say, "What half-baked Minister thought this one up?"

When, two or three years ago, we pressed Treasury Ministers to do something about what was called the Dublin trip, whereby horses went to Dublin to avoid high rates of VAT, we quickly persuaded them that the position

was indefensible. What sort of trip will our shooting sportsmen have to undertake to train for their sports? The problem will arise next year and in 2000, not just in 2002.

One of the lessons Conservative Members have had to learn is the extent to which tabloid editorial writers appear to have short memories. The day of reckoning will come. The public and the tabloid press may have supported a total ban, but when the consequences begin to be seen, Ministers will find themselves in an embarrassing position.

There is an alternative for Ministers to consider tonight. The Government could admit here and now that they have got the legislation totally wrong. They could accept the amendment, and their Back Benchers could use their free vote to support it. Alternatively—I know the way these things work—they could give an undertaking to take the issue away and to come back with a new proposal to give effect to what our shooting sportsmen deserve and need, and to accommodate the needs of the disabled, about which we talked earlier.

Either way, they can rest assured that the House is certain to pursue the issue again, because the ban is unprincipled, unnecessary, unjustified and unworthy of a tolerant and enlightened society, which, without any compromise on public safety, nevertheless should recognise its responsibilities to minority interests. The Government failed that test in another place two weeks ago and they deserve to be defeated again tonight.

7 pm

Mr. Michael: With the permission of the House, let me say that I thought that the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) made a rather sad speech. It is clear that he has an awful lot to learn about effective opposition. He must know in his heart of hearts that, however much he may disagree with our view, we are doing what we believe is right, and not merely what we believe is popular. We are dealing with important issues, and an important Bill.

The hon. Gentleman made himself totally absurd when he tried to say that the Government were being tyrannical and then went on to quote the words of my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) and for Vauxhall (Ms Hoey) and Lord Howell in another place—three Labour Members who have engaged in debate on the issues. Quite frankly, rational debate is alive and well on the Government Benches, and seems to be completely dead within the ranks of the Conservative party.

The hon. Member for Ryedale suggested that there were inconsistencies. His view is consistent only if he does not want any ban on handguns. That is a reasonable view, but the issue was decided before the recess, when the House voted overwhelmingly in favour of a ban on .22 handguns.

The hon. Gentleman accepted that we can and will allow overseas shooters to use pistols in order to participate in Olympic and Commonwealth competition. It is rather sad that he then went on almost to give succour to those who might argue against the ability of the United Kingdom to stage those events. His was hardly a patriotic approach.

Mr. Grieve: In two sentences, one following the other, the Minister contradicted himself. He stressed the great need to ban handguns, and then he said that he would tolerate the exception in respect of certain sportsmen from abroad. Having accepted that, how does he then justify not providing another exception allowing Olympic sportsmen to train?

Mr. Michael: Once again, the hon. Gentleman was not listening. It has become rather a habit of his. I was responding to the hon. Member for Ryedale.

Quite simply, we have accepted that the ability of Britain to stage the Olympic and Commonwealth games justifies making an exception—as we have agreed to do in respect of Manchester—in order that sportsmen and sportswomen should not be excluded from the possibility of participating in games hosted in Britain. We have always made that quite clear.

We have also made it clear that we shall not extend that exception, which is why we cannot accept the amendment. We have always been perfectly honest and open about the implications of the decision that we have taken. In theory, we could refuse to use those powers in the interests of the consistency that so interests the hon. Gentleman, but it seems pragmatic and sensible to follow the course for which we have argued.

In answer to the hon. Member for Ryedale, it is not a matter of being careless of the interests of sportsmen and sportswomen. We started by considering whether such sports could be protected, and we reached the conclusion that they could not. It is not a matter of sportsmen posing a threat; it is merely that the amendment strikes at the heart of the legislation.

We do not believe that keeping small-calibre pistols at designated sites, as envisaged by the Lords amendment, would provide sufficient protection for the public. We believe that it would create a dangerous loophole, and that no security system would guarantee that pistols were not removed from those places. Therefore, we consider that their continued possession cannot be allowed. We have always accepted that the implications for the sport are serious. We do so with regret, but openly and honestly.

The question was raised about the extension of the Bill to Northern Ireland, and I shall make the position clear. The Bill does not extend to Northern Ireland. The Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997—introduced by the previous Government—does not extend to Northern Ireland. Consequently, the provisions of the Firearms (Amendment) (No.2) Bill will not apply to Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has had its own firearms legislation for a number of years. Lord Cullen's report was given separate consideration in Northern Ireland, in tandem with the review of the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981.

The review of the legislation and the consideration of Lord Cullen's findings have now been completed, and separate recommendations on each have been passed to Ministers. They are currently being considered by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and a response to Lord Cullen's report, including the question of a handgun ban, together with proposals for the reform of the firearms legislation generally, will be announced as soon as decisions have been taken.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) asked about the possible misuse of a handgun brought in for international sporting events within the Olympic and Commonwealth games. When discussing the exemption

[Mr. Michael]

that was made in September, I told my hon. Friends that we would have an opportunity to look at the lessons that needed to be learned in terms of controlling the admission of weapons into the country. However, we cannot isolate permission for Olympic or Commonwealth status. Who is to determine whether any individuals could rise to that skill and quality at some point in future, even if they have not reached that standard of competition now?

I remind the hon. Gentleman that foreign visitors need a British visitor's permit, and that, in addition to the Secretary of State's authority to get a permit, the visitor must have a British sponsor. So safeguards are built into the requirements.

The hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) regretted the end of the sport of pistol shooting. His speech reflected the nature of this afternoon's debate. Basically, he did not accept the will of the House that there should be a ban on .22 handguns. To a great extent, that is what the debate has been about. We consider that the Bill is necessary and that the proposed exemption would have a serious and significant effect on the legislation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North said that people were sick and tired of waiting for compensation. The problems of getting compensation through quickly and undertaking proper assessments of all the costs involved will be considerable, and we shall undertake that work as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend also raised the serious matter of an article in the press. I understand that the author is under police investigation as a result of the issues that he raised. My hon. Friend is certainly right to say that the law must be applied properly and without distinction.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) seemed to display some embarrassment and guilt. I remind him that there were twice as many Labour Members present as Conservatives when he intervened. At best, his was an unfortunate intervention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Mrs. McGuire) spoke out for common sense and for the wishes of the House, as well as for her constituents, in favour of the ban on .22 weapons being carried into legislation without the proposed Lords amendment which the House should reject.

Question put, That this House doth disagree with the Lords in the said amendment:—

The House divided: Ayes 292, Noes 160.

Division No. 78] **[7.8 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Austin, John
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godman, Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jennifer *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John

McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Grogan, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hoey, Kate
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Mactaggart, Fiona
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Marek, Dr John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. James Cran.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment disagreed to.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock) (*seated and covered*): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Not all the Division bells are working. I think that it is due to people not checking whether all the plugs have been put back in following building work during the summer recess. Could that be looked into, especially in relation to the Cloister Huts block? Some hon. Members could be substantially embarrassed by not knowing of the Division because—due to meetings—they do not have their television sets switched on. It is a matter of fact that not all the Division bells are working, and it is bad form.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Does the hon. Member wish to hear my response to his point of order?

Mr. Mackinlay *indicated assent.*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to him for bringing the matter to the attention of the House. I am sure that it has been noted by the Serjeant at Arms. If there appears to be any sign of difficulty, I may be a little generous in the time that I allow for the Division.

Committee appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to certain of their amendments to the Bill: Mr. James Cran, Mr. John Greenway, Jane Kennedy, Mr. Alun Michael and Mr. Colin Pickthall; three to be the quorum of the Committee.—[*Mr. Alun Michael.*]

To withdraw immediately.

Reasons for disagreeing to certain Lords amendments reported, and agreed to; to be communicated to the Lords.

Education (Student Loans) Bill

Not amended, in the Standing Committee, considered.

Clause 2

REGULATIONS TO PRESCRIBE CERTAIN TERMS OF STUDENT LOAN AGREEMENTS

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): I beg to move amendment No. 1, in page 2, line 26, after 'repayments,' insert—

'(ia) such terms relating to the interest to be borne by the loan,'.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With this, it will be convenient to discuss Government amendments Nos. 2 to 5.

Dr. Howells: This is a small technical amendment to a Bill that is already purely technical. It would require that loan agreements specify how and when inflation is measured in setting the annual interest rate payable on the loans. It involves no change in our policy towards borrowers, or towards the debt sale itself. For the borrowers, the key point remains that they will repay no more in real terms than they borrowed. Interest rates will continue to be pegged to the rate of inflation.

The method used in calculating the annual interest rate already exists in the student loan regulations. The amendment will not change the method, the index used or the period over which inflation is measured. In line with our objectives for the rest of the Bill, we are simply transferring a provision in the loan regulations to loan agreements.

The need for the amendment is straightforward. If we do not introduce it, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will continue to have discretion over the period in which inflation is measured and over which the index is used to measure inflation. We have been advised that even that limited discretion could create potentially significant levels of uncertainty on the part of those buying the loans. That uncertainty would be priced into the bids and would add to the Government's costs. Removing the uncertainty will increase the competitiveness of the bids.

The change is entirely in line with the broad thrust of the Bill. Clause 2 already freezes the time and manner of repayment of the loans and the borrowers' right to deferment and cancellation. The amendment will freeze the method used to calculate the annual rate of interest. There will be no losers from the change. The Government will get more competitive bids, and borrowers and debt purchasers will know where they stand and that no adverse changes can be made at a later date. I urge the House to accept the amendment.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): We have no objections.

Amendment agreed to.

Amendments made: No. 2, in page 2, line 31, at end insert—

'(3A) For paragraph 1(4) and (5) there shall be substituted—

"(4) Regulations made in pursuance of sub-paragraph (1)(b)(ia) above shall make such provision with respect to the rate of interest for the time being applicable to a public sector student loan as the Secretary of State considers appropriate to maintain the value in real terms of the outstanding amount of the loan.

(5) The provision required by sub-paragraph (4) above shall be framed by reference to such index of prices as may be specified in or determined in accordance with the regulations".'.

No. 3, in page 2, line 32, leave out '1(3)' and insert

'1(5) (as substituted by subsection (3A) above)'.

No. 4, in page 2, line 33, leave out '(3A)' and insert '(6)'.

No. 5, in page 3, line 1, leave out '1(3A)' and insert '1(6)'.—*[Dr. Howells.]*

Order for Third Reading read.

7.26 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I stress that the Bill does not deal with measures arising from the Dearing report or the Government's response to it. It relates solely to the student loan book and the debt that we intend to sell on to the private sector.

As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer made clear in the Budget on 2 July, we intend to raise £1.6 billion from the sale of part of the student loans debt in this financial year, to be followed by a further £1.5 billion in the next financial year. We have ensured that the changes introduced by the Bill will not adversely affect students. The key terms of the loans will be frozen to protect student borrowers, and we shall retain an independent assessor to deal with any complaints from students. Because the loans will become commercial agreements, they will be subject to both consumer and data protection legislation. Minimum collection standards will be laid down in the sale agreement. Borrowers with a disability are presently treated as a special case, and that will continue.

The Bill will protect students, and it also reaffirms the Government's firm commitment to sound public finance. The sale proceeds of more than £3 billion will be used to meet the Government's expenditure commitments, including those in higher education. The Bill will help to support our education plans based on raising standards, extending access and high quality provision. I commend it to the House.

7.28 pm

Mrs. Browning: I shall not detain the House long, because, as was outlined on Second Reading and in Committee, the Opposition recognise that the Government are building on a measure introduced by the previous Government. Therefore, we have no objections to the measures that the Minister has outlined tonight. I noticed, however, that his opening remarks about the Dearing report were somewhat defensive. Since we first debated the matter, the Government's response to Dearing has become clear and students' loans will be much larger as a result. We await tomorrow with interest, because we shall have an opportunity to discuss the Government's response to Dearing in more detail. I have nothing more to add, so I shall not detain the House unnecessarily.

7.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): I hate to break into this collusion between the Conservative party and the Labour Government but, as on Second Reading, the Bill has been allowed to slip through as if it does not matter. It does matter; far from helping students, the measure will be a great burden on future generations of students. I find it disgraceful that those of us who benefited from the grant system should be the very generation to impose massive debt problems on future generations of students.

It is important to point out that the co-operation between the Government and the official Opposition is not accepted by every opposition party. The Scottish National party's view has remained unchanged throughout the Bill's passage—we are opposed in principle to student loans, whether in government or, as the Government wish, private hands. We see it as anathema that current and future debt should be transferred into the hands of private profiteers.

The collusion between the two main parties will ensure that the Bill goes through this evening, as they have decided to get it through as quickly as possible. However, we must not forget that this is a Tory proposal from before the election, and the Bill is yet another example of the Labour Government doing the Tories' dirty work. I urge the Government to come clean on how they expect to redirect the resources that will arise from this latest sell-off.

On 10 July, the Chancellor of the Exchequer gave the Government's reasons for proceeding with the privatisation of the Student Loans Company. He said:

"Given the tightness of our plans generally and in particular the priority we wish to give to education programmes, the Government have decided to proceed with the sale."—[*Official Report*, 10 July 1997; Vol. 297, c. *608*.]

Does this mean that the, as-yet undefined, resources released by the sale will be reinvested in education? How much do the Government expect to "save", in their own words? Will the money be redirected? If so, will it be reinvested in higher education?

I have a suggestion for how to spend £3 million to £5 million of the money. The House will be aware of the absurd position whereby Scottish students studying in Scotland will pay for only three years' tuition fees for their four-year courses, while English, Welsh and Northern Irish students studying in Scotland will pay for the full four years. The Scottish universities have suggested that the cost of removing this anomaly would be between £3 million and £5 million.

I ask the Minister to give a guarantee this evening that the money raised from the sale will be used to remedy that outrageous situation. I am happy to give way to the Minister. As he does not rise, I presume that he does not have an answer, which is very enlightening, in terms of the Government's attitude. Many folk who voted for them will be shocked, as they will have expected more from the incoming Government—particularly given the nature of the Government they replaced.

[Mr. Andrew Welsh]

The Minister will be aware also of recommendation 82 in the Dearing report, which stated:

"We recommend to the Government that the Inland Revenue should be used as the principal route for the collection of income contingent contributions from graduates in work, on behalf of the Student Loans Company."

To my mind, that is a clear sign that Sir Ron Dearing and his committee viewed their suggested reforms of student finance within a context of a state-owned and operated loans company. Are the Government considering using the good offices of the Inland Revenue to allow private companies to collect their debts? The House is entitled to hear the Government's view on that.

The Bill forms the basis of the Government's other student finance reforms. The privatisation of the Student Loans Company—with one or two companies eager to win control of student debt—is a necessary first step towards expanding the level of student debt burden. To ease the way towards ever-higher loans for tuition fees and maintenance, the Government are prepared to hand over student debt to companies whose sole motivation is profit; profit at the expense of student need and in the face of student hardship. Under the private profiteers, student debt will quadruple.

The average student will have no option but to take out those additional loans, but will do so with no real guarantee that their loan arrangements will not or cannot change in future. The Government have opened the door to future private exploitation of students and student debt, and that is the real failure of the measure. Student drop-out rates have increased by 12 per cent. under the state-owned Student Loans Company. I dread to think what that rate will be under the higher levels of private debt.

The Bill represents a new dogma shared by the Labour and Conservative parties, and forms part of a cosy consensus between the parties. It is the first blow of many in a year that will hit students, universities and colleges with outrageous and, to my mind, unjustifiable changes to the established pattern of student finance. The Scottish National party opposes the Bill in principle, and I hope that the Minister will listen to the message from students the length and breadth of the country. Some 6,000 students gathered in Edinburgh to make clear their objection to what the Government are doing. Many of them voted Labour in the hope that there would be a change in philosophy and policy. They have been quite shocked to find that the Labour Government are carrying out a Tory policy.

I will be interested to hear what the Liberal Democrats have to say, although I notice that they accentuate their opposition to tuition fees while quietly forgetting student loans which—tonight and on Second Reading—they support. The Scottish National party is opposed not only to the privatisation of student loans but to the whole concept. It hits directly at the traditional philosophy of Scottish education—a system that is open to all according to ability and irrespective of wealth or any other consideration. The Labour Government have attacked that traditional Scottish outlook. Totally against the Scottish tradition, they will remove from a swathe of the population the ability to go on to further and higher education. That is why I am against the Bill and the consensus among the Labour, Conservative and—I presume—Liberal Democrat parties.

To put it mildly, this would not have been the first measure that we would have introduced to try to solve the problems. In our view, it will only deepen the crisis facing our students. For that and many other reasons, we shall vote against the Bill. I invite the Liberal Democrats to join us, but—as on Second Reading—they will no doubt support the Government. I find it objectionable that the measure has been rushed through. Nobody consulted my party, and we were excluded from the normal channels, which agreed to rush it through. If we had been consulted, we would have informed the Government of our opposition. Tonight, we shall vote against the Bill on principle. Labour Members ought to be ashamed of this unacceptable measure. If they do not believe me, they should ask the students who are up in arms about what they are trying to do.

7.38 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I can assure the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh)—who is not party to Liberal Democrat deliberations—that it will become clear where we stand on this Bill as I speak for the next hour and a half.

I find it extremely difficult to listen to Government and Conservative Members speaking with one voice. I can understand why the Minister wishes to rush the Bill through. It is increasingly evident that it is not the Government who are pushing through the Bill, but the ghosts of the previous Administration. As the Tory party tears itself apart and gives the appearance of a party in terminal decay, it continues to have an iron grip on education spending in this House.

This sordid little Bill was conceived in Tory central office and born in Walworth road. It was sordid when the present Minister opposed the concept before the election, and it is sordid now. It is going through the House at the speed it is, not because Ministers believe in it, but because the proceeds are essential to the Chancellor's spending plans for this year and next.

Before the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh) turned on the Liberal Democrats, he made a good point. No student will benefit as a result of the passing of the Bill, and not a single penny extra will go to our universities. It is important for hon. Members on the Government Benches—and for those on the packed Conservative Benches—to understand that. It does not matter that the proposals are no different from the sales of other public assets that were so derided by the Government when in opposition.

The student loan portfolio that is under the hammer today is a national asset. It is worth £3.1 billion and it is being offered to the City at a knockdown price. Can the Minister tell the House what is different about this sale to the City? What was so wrong about selling the National Grid or Railtrack at knockdown prices to the so-called City fat cats, but not this public asset? What is the difference? How does such a fire sale fit with the Government's proposals rightly to demand the test of best value on the awarding of local government contracts, for instance?

Can the Minister answer those two questions clearly, openly and without prevarication? Does he believe that the sale of those enormous public assets—on the terms you have agreed—represents the best value to taxpayers, yes or no? Secondly, if you say yes—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

Mr. Willis: I am sorry. My apologies to the Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. If I am on my feet, the hon. Member must resume his seat. He has now corrected himself. He has already made a number of speeches in the House, and that is a point of procedure that he should have absorbed by now.

Mr. Willis: My apologies, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to you and to the Minister. If he is prepared to say that this is best value to the taxpayers, will he be prepared to say what is the level of discount being sought by investors in order that the debt can be bought? I do not expect him to give me a precise figure, but the level of subsidy is directly relevant to the cost of selling this portfolio to the taxpayers.

The Minister said, in his former life as Opposition spokesman, that any subsidy above 25 per cent. would be excessive for the sale of the student loan portfolio, when the former Government wanted to attract private sector lenders into the student loan market. Perhaps he will say whether he expects the subsidy to be greater or less than 50 per cent. of the total value of the loan portfolio.

While Liberal Democrats understand the predicament that the Minister has been placed in by the Chancellor's commitment to the previous Government's tax and spend proposals for the next two years, he must understand the outrage felt on our Benches when we see what may be as much as a £1 billion subsidy paid to the private sector when our universities are experiencing the worst cash crisis in their history.

In effect, the £1 billion that the Minister is potentially giving away would stave off for the lifetime of this Parliament the requirement to introduce tuition fees. The sum of money saved would be far more than the total amount of money that will go to our universities because of imposing tuition fees in the lifetime of this Parliament. If the Minister disagrees with that assessment, can he say how much additional money will go to our universities in the lifetime of this Parliament from the imposition of tuition fees?

Another issue is the redefinition of lending proposed by the Secretary of State for the future treatment of student loans. If the Secretary of State is successful in persuading the Chancellor to change the redefinition of lending, we shall support him in his efforts. Could that principle not be applied to the existing loan portfolio? In that case, would the Minister consider not proceeding with the second tranche of the £1.5 billion sale next year?

Finally, I must ask the Minister whether at least one of the institutions that he expected to bid for the portfolio has already dropped out. Can he tell the House how many institutions are still actively bidding for the portfolio?

I must inform the hon. Member for Angus that, if a Division is called tonight, the Liberal Democrats will be opposing the Bill.

7.44 pm

Mr. Byers: I shall answer those points, many of which will be more appropriately debated tomorrow during the Conservative Opposition day debate on Dearing and the Government's response to it.

To answer the points raised by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), we shall be publishing the names of those companies that are submitting for the portfolio. It would be inappropriate to give the information that he has requested tonight.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Why?

Mr. Byers: For the simple reason that we are in the process of running a strong competition to get the best deal for the taxpayer. It is the competition that will ensure that we get the best deal—a fact expressed by Opposition Members. I can give a guarantee that the details of those companies that are interested and are moving to the final stage of the process will be made public, as we made public the names of the 20 companies that entered the first phase of the competition.

I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough talk about the outrage on the Liberal Benches about this measure. It is a pretty recent outrage, because not one of them voted against it on Second Reading. The hon. Gentleman referred to a debate we had when the previous Government introduced their attempt at a twin-track approach to student loans—a different approach from the one that we are proposing. It was in that context that we objected to the subsidy that was being offered. We have a strong competition in relation to the student loans book. We shall be receiving a number of substantial offers. It would be inappropriate this evening to reveal details of the discounts that we expect to be offered. Doing so would not get the best possible deal.

On the points raised by the hon. Member for Angus (Mr. Welsh), the Prime Minister has committed the Government to extending access to further and higher education by an extra 500,000 places by the end of this Parliament—not rhetoric, but commitment to open up access. This measure will open up access, extend opportunities and ensure that we can continue to provide high-quality provision. On the basis of those three principles, I urge the House to vote for Third Reading.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time:—

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 24.

Division No. 79] **[7.47 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Barron, Kevin
Ainger, Nick	Battle, John
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*	Bayley, Hugh
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*	Beard, Nigel
Armstrong, Ms Hilary	Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Ashton, Joe	Bennett, Andrew F
Austin, John	Benton, Joe
Barnes, Harry	Bermingham, Gerald

Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenniler *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Saller, Martin
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jon Owen Jones and
Mr. Greg Pope.

NOES

Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Dafis, Cynog
Fearn, Ronnie
Gorrie, Donald
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*

Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Sanders, Adrian
Stunell, Andrew
Swinney, John
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Margaret Ewing and Mr. Elfyn Llwyd.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time, and passed.

WELSH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee) (sittings)),

That the Welsh Grand Committee shall meet at Westminster on Tuesday 18th November at half past Ten o'clock to take questions under Standing Order No. 103, (Welsh Grand Committee (questions for oral answer)), and to consider the matter of North Wales and the Government's proposals for a Welsh Assembly under Standing Order No. 107 (Welsh Grand Committee (matters relating exclusively to Wales)).—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

SUPREME COURT (OFFICES) BILL

Ordered,

That, in respect of the Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Unadopted Roads

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

8.1 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I begin by thanking you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise the problems relating to unadopted roads, and by thanking my hon. Friend the Minister for being here to address the subject.

In raising this issue, I should like to draw attention to similar problems in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes). As a Whip he does not have the opportunity to raise the matter in such a debate, but his constituency, too, is plagued by the existence of unadopted roads and the long-standing conflicts and upset that they create. I also thank my hon. Friend for Neath (Mr. Hain), who is now an Under-Secretary of State for Wales, and other colleagues who have raised this matter in the House. It is of some reassurance to me that this matter has vexed some of my colleagues over many years, just as it has troubled their constituents.

All too often, when roads are discussed in national forums or the media, the debate is dominated by the case for or against a new motorway or the bypassing of a town or village. Such debates invariably attract petitioners, professors and protesters who argue the merits of Government policy and trade statistics and traffic flows. The Minister will have become familiar with such well-organised lobbies in her first few months in post.

During my few months as the Member of Parliament for Don Valley, my mailbag and surgeries have made me aware of the fact that, for a large number of my constituents, roads are a major issue. They live in isolation, in quiet cul-de-sacs, traditional terraces and leafy lanes. This group is not organised under a national banner and has no PR officers or full-time lobbyists. This large group of protesters comprises the residents of unadopted roads—private roads that have never been taken into the responsibility of a local authority. They have their own story to tell, some going back generations.

They include a lady in Clifton terrace, Conisbrough, who told me that, as a result of increased traffic from a recently built crescent that surrounds her little road, there is now a drop of 1 ft from the edge of her property into the road. A funeral hearse could not enter the road, and the body had to be moved to another house to shorten the journey to the hearse.

There is the plight of residents in Ingleborough drive, Sprotbrough, who are threatening to close their road to parents who park their cars to drop off and collect their children from the school opposite. The residents of Ingleborough drive are furious that, although many other people use their road, worsening its condition, it is not publicly maintained. Ironically, while part of their road is adopted, most of it is not.

Then there is the example of the elderly lady in the adjoining Ingle grove who refuses to leave her home because she feels that the road is too dangerous and she might fall. Or there are the residents of Minney Moor lane in Conisbrough, a steep sloping track running off the main Doncaster road. The road is subject to flash flooding and, in winter, water pours off the main road, washing away

[Caroline Flint]

the top surface of the lane. The local archive reveals that the road was recognised as a private road as early as 1858. A letter from the borough engineer in 1959 appealed to residents to agree to improvements

"since without the approval of all the frontagers concerned the work cannot proceed."

The present residents of Minney Moor lane must feel that they are stuck in a time warp when they read such letters. The sad truth is that the present law for dealing with these problems is inoperable. We often hear of the concerns of the ambulance and fire services about traffic-calming measures hindering their progress. There is nothing like a rutted, potholed, unadopted road to enforce traffic calming—although when I am told that an ambulance driver collecting a patient who has experienced an angina attack is concerned that the bumpy journey may be doing more harm than good, "calming" is the last word that comes to mind. In several cases, I am informed, doctors will not drive along such roads.

The problem is not isolated or parochial. In Doncaster borough alone there are about 120 unadopted roads, plus a large number of unadopted service roads to the rear of terraced properties. There are an estimated 40,000 unadopted roads in Britain. That means that there are a lot of people left wanting a road policy that works for them. Private roads are largely historical accidents. In this day and age, no new private roads should be created. Modern planning law ensures that a developer makes up the roads to a suitable standard for adoption. Thereafter the roads are maintained by the local authority in the normal way.

However, the cost of making up existing unadopted roads for adoption is the responsibility of the affected residents, and that cost is usually prohibitive. In Doncaster, no road has been made up for adoption since 1986. Under present law, the local authority has the power to carry out emergency work to obviate danger to traffic, but with the capital constraints, even my own authority has ceased to undertake emergency work on unadopted roads, so roads become ever more neglected and, in some cases, extremely dangerous.

Mr. Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford, South): Is it not the case that residents of unadopted roads see other roads throughout their local authority area in Doncaster and Bradford, and cannot understand why moneys cannot be spent on their streets? They do not understand the difficulties that local authorities have in how they spend their money.

Caroline Flint: My hon. Friend is quite right. People would like their sense of inequality and injustice put right. I hope that the Minister will address that today.

Where does all this leave the residents of private roads? The money to pay for the initial work must be funded from the authority's capital funds if it is to deal with this issue, but competing priorities—especially for those for which the authority has a statutory responsibility—will always take precedent.

Doncaster is not alone, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe) rightly points out. This problem is commonplace among local authorities of all political persuasions throughout the country.

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I agree that there is a need for this issue to be taken seriously. Although my own constituency does not have as many as 120 unadopted roads, I, like many other hon. Members, have a number of constituents who are concerned about the issue. It is often difficult to know who is responsible for which road. In cases where we are not sure whether the borough council or the county council is responsible for a road or whether it is private, it turns out to be unadopted.

My hon. Friend is right to say that sometimes there is a choice. Should a road be incapable of use by an ambulance just because it might otherwise be used by motor cycles speeding up and down it? The idea that a road that is full of potholes can be used for traffic calming rather than being in a fit state to be used by emergency vehicles and for people's ordinary transport is difficult to cope with. I hope that the Minister will take my hon. Friend's arguments very seriously. These matters are of great concern to those who feel that they cannot afford to finance the work needed to enable vehicles to use their road.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution.

Where does all this leave the residents of private roads? They can club together to have the road made up, but at about £200 per metre of road they often face a bill of £2,000 or more per household. For that reason, some residents object, and the plan invariably fails to proceed.

I am advised that houses on such roads cost less, which sometimes leads to a lower council tax. At one extreme the price differential leaves houses in the same council tax band as their adopted neighbours, while at the other extreme a modest saving on the purchase price 10 or 20 years ago is more than offset by a complete blight on the sale today, as prospective buyers make their first bumpy journey to view the house, never to return. The problem may be historical, but the misery seems eternal. Private roads are a private nightmare.

In this short debate, I ask the Minister to investigate the possible medium and long-term solutions to the problem. In time, the adoption of private roads may become one of our national transport objectives. We should seek imaginative ways of overcoming the financial obstacles to the making up of roads for adoption, such as using private finance to avoid the local authority having to make an initial capital outlay. Householders and other bodies with frontages on such streets are liable for making up private roads. The cost could perhaps be spread over 10 years as a charge on their council tax, thereby spreading the financial impact for present and future householders.

Private, unadopted roads should be regarded in the same way as outside toilets and asbestos in buildings: a legacy of the past and not something that we should live with in the future.

Mr. Sutcliffe: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. She said that we should find inventive solutions. Some of the privatised utilities use unadopted roads, such as water companies for the drains and telecommunication companies. We should try to find alternative ways for them to work in partnership with residents and the local authority to come up with creative solutions.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for his further intervention. He is right. If householders, private utilities

that use the streets and the local authority worked together they could have fruitful discussions and find a solution for the future.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Does my hon. Friend have any experience of the hazards to women who have to walk along such streets? They face lighting and other problems, especially at night. In Norfolk, particularly in Norwich, refuse vehicles have problems getting down unadopted roads, and people do not get their refuse bins emptied. That creates terrible problems and makes it difficult to obtain contracts. Will my hon. Friend comment on the hazards to women and the problems of refuse collection in such areas?

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. As a student of the university of East Anglia for three years, and having lived in one of the outlying villages, I know full well the problems in Norwich and Norfolk. I am pleased that so many of my hon. Friends are present to support me in what is clearly a national debate of major importance. This is not a parochial issue: it affects the rural parts of our constituencies.

On the subject of women, I have seen for myself that one takes one's life in one's hands when walking down such streets. I am sure that my hon. Friends are aware of the problems facing householders when someone falls off his bicycle having gone into a crater in one of these roads. Householders are liable for any damages that that person claims against the people who live in the street.

I hope that the Minister will deal with these issues of public health and safety. As we enter the next century, people should have the right to live on roads that are made up and fit to walk and travel on. It is not beyond our ambition and vision to consign unadopted roads to the past.

As the new Member of Parliament for Don Valley, I thought that this problem may have been brought up only in my surgeries. I welcome the fact that, as this debate has shown, many hon. Members consider this to be an important issue. Hon. Members are inundated with representations from organised lobbies putting forward their case on transport policy. When one considers how many people live in those 120 roads in the Doncaster area, one realises how many are affected every day by the dire situations in their streets and on their doorsteps.

Judy Mallaber: Is my hon. Friend aware that many of the people who have these concerns are isolated and are not from organised groups, precisely because unadopted roads are often in rural areas, are unlit and isolated and do not have many people living on them? They come to our surgeries to ask for help, but it is difficult for them to make their voices heard, and they do not get support from many other people. Is that also the position in my hon. Friend's constituency?

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. Yes, that is position. People come to me, as the Member of Parliament, for my help in putting their case. I am grateful to my hon. Friends who have seen fit to participate in this debate and who, having done so, will be seen by their constituents as supporting them on this important issue.

On behalf of the many affected residents in Don Valley and the many other constituencies represented this evening, I thank the Minister for listening.

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate. This is an important issue, and the turnout of hon. Members shows the level of support. The problem affects tens of thousands of constituents throughout the country. In my constituency, every ward faces the serious problem of unadopted roads, which should be dealt with as part of the regeneration of the area. The problem is particularly acute in former mining constituencies, where British Coal assumed some responsibility in the past, but that is no longer the position.

This issue is about regeneration, improving the quality of life and giving people the dignity of a decent environment literally outside their front door. We can all talk about this problem in generalities, but I ask my hon. Friend to listen briefly to the case of a lady in my constituency, which I heard about at a public meeting. Mrs. Lily Earnshaw is 94 years young.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman is making an intervention. I remind him that interventions should be reasonably brief.

Mr. Kemp: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I ask my hon. Friend to bear in mind the case of Mrs. Lily Earnshaw, who, at 94, suffered an accident and the ambulance had serious difficulties getting along her street. That problem is shared by many in the constituency. In life she wants dignity, but she had a tragic experience when her husband died last year. The cortege could not leave the family home, and had to be organised from the hospital direct to the cemetery. A 95-year-old man could not have that dignity. I spoke to my 94-year-old constituent, and she pointed out that her nephew is Sir Terence Burns, who is a permanent secretary at the Treasury. Perhaps the Minister could bear that in mind when she makes financial representations.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend, and I thank Lily for helping us to drop such an important name into the debate.

I ask the Minister to give this matter due consideration, and wish her every success in her efforts to help improve the quality of transport and the life of road users as we approach the millennium.

8.18 pm

The Minister of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I am responding to the debate in place of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), and I apologise for her absence. As a fellow Minister in the Department, I hope that hon. Members will accept that we have discussed this issue and I am responding on behalf of the Department.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) for raising this important issue. I am also grateful for the interventions of my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), for

[Ms Hilary Armstrong]

Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber) and for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp). This is a matter of great concern, not only in my hon. Friend's constituency but elsewhere in the country.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Perhaps you can help me. I am a new Member, and I should like to know whether it is in order for a Minister who was not here at the beginning of the debate, when someone from the Department involved should have been present, to reply.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): It is customary for the Minister responsible for the Department to be present at the beginning of the debate and to respond at the end. I think that the Minister of State has already apologised to the House.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Unadopted roads are known in the legislation as private streets, and I shall use that term in my speech. People in the country will probably recognise it more easily.

The Government's involvement in private streets is very limited, and, as a consequence, so is our information about them. The latest reliable figures for the extent of private streets date from as long ago as 1972. At that time, there were some 40,000 private streets—totalling about 4,500 miles—throughout England and Wales. In 1990, it was estimated that it would cost over £2,000 million to make up all private streets for adoption. My best guess, in the absence of firm information, is that the number of private streets is gradually declining in extent, and that the real costs of making them up are declining accordingly, but I suspect that today's figures are not very different from those that I have quoted.

My hon. Friend kindly gave me notice of some of the main points she wanted to make, and I shall do my best to answer them. First, however, it may be helpful if I set out the background in law. A private street is a highway that is not maintainable at public expense by a highway authority. As with many aspects of highways legislation, there is a long history behind the law relating to road maintenance and adoption. My hon. Friend may be relieved to learn that I do not propose to rehearse the whole story now.

Suffice it to say that 1835 marked something of a watershed, as it was the Highway Act of that year that introduced a provision whereby, for a street to become publicly maintainable, the "responsible public authority" must deliberately resolve to adopt it. Nowadays, that authority will normally be the local highway authority—for example, Doncaster borough council for most of my hon. Friend's constituency.

In most cases, the responsibility for maintaining a private street will fall to the owners of the properties adjoining it—or the frontagers, as they are known in the language that is used—who are also legally liable to meet the expenses incurred by the council, as "street works authority", in making up the street for adoption.

The current law governing the adoption of private streets is contained in the Highways Act 1980. Part XI of that Act contains what is known as the private street works code. Under the code, a street works authority can resolve to make up a private street at any time, and the frontagers have no legal veto over that decision—although most authorities are reluctant to proceed in the face of substantial opposition. After the works, the street is usually adopted. The authority can apportion the expenses of making up the street among the frontagers by reference to the frontage lengths of individual properties, but it may also modify those apportionments if it has resolved in advance to take account of the degree of benefit, if any, that individual properties derive from the works. In addition, the authority may, if it sees fit, contribute to the cost of the schemes itself.

There are opportunities to challenge apportionments. Any property owners who believe that they have a case can put objections to the authority, on any of a number of grounds set out in the Act, and any of the objections that remain unresolved between them can be determined by a magistrates court. The authority may then demand payment. Once that demand is made, there is, as a final safeguard, a right of appeal to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State against the sum demanded. That strictly limited appellate jurisdiction is the extent of the Department's involvement in individual cases. The Secretary of State cannot, for example, direct an authority to make up or not make up any given private street.

That is not quite the end of the story. In the 1950s, to avoid the wholesale creation of new private street works liability—which had been such a feature of inter-war housing—the advance payments code was introduced. Under the code, a developer building a new property on land fronting a private street must deposit a sum equivalent to the authority's estimated private street works charge before building starts. That amount is set against the frontager's own eventual liability for street works charges, which is discharged to the extent of that sum plus accrued interest. The frontager then pays any shortfall, or receives a refund, as the case may be.

There is an alternative route to adoption. A developer can enter into an agreement with a highway authority for the adoption of a new estate road or other private street when it has been satisfactorily completed. In that case, the advance payments code does not apply, and the house buyer on a new estate has the assurance that there will be no street works charges to be paid later on. Those adoption agreements, as they are known, offer such obvious advantages to both the developer and the authority that that approach is often the preferred one.

That—as I am sure you will be relieved to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker—concludes my description of the ways in which street adoption can be achieved, and the protective provisions that exist to protect individual householders involved from unreasonable demands.

I shall now outline the discretion that local authorities have to contribute from their own resources. Local authorities have the power to moderate street works charges in four ways. First, as I have already said, they may take account of the degree of benefit received. They would typically use that power in order to reduce the charge payable by a householder with a long flank frontage who may receive little or no benefit from the works. They may make up the difference themselves, rather than reapportioning the cost among other frontagers. Secondly, they may allow payments by instalments. Thirdly, in cases of hardship, the authority can waive reimbursement of the principal sum due until the property is sold, and in the meantime recover from the

householder the interest on the outstanding charge only. Finally, local authorities have a general discretion to bear part or all of the costs of a scheme themselves.

In that context, it is worth noting that local authorities have the power to use a proportion of their capital receipts from the sale of assets—generally 25 per cent. in the case of council houses, and 50 per cent. in the case of most other receipts—on capital expenditure of any kind in any year. It is, of course, for authorities themselves to determine how those usable capital receipts are spent, in the light of local priorities and circumstances. I simply point out that the power exists.

Having said that local authorities have the power to make payments, I must add that there is an issue about whether it is right for them to do so. There is no doubt that many who live on private streets see the liability to pay private street works charges as unfair. That is particularly true of people whose houses have long frontages that make them liable to correspondingly high charges. While I sympathise with those to whom these charges represent some hardship, we should remember that the liability for street works appears in the local land charges register, and should therefore be taken into account in the purchase price of the house.

Many householders have paid for their own streets to be made up and may feel aggrieved by a decision to make the service free to future users, especially in residential roads where the benefits will be enjoyed almost entirely by the householders and those who visit them, rather than by the public at large.

My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley mentioned the blighting effect of a street not being made up. She seemed to be saying that making up streets would produce an increase in house prices greater than the cost of the work. That is an additional argument for house owners, rather than local authorities, to bear the cost.

My hon. Friend spoke about the difficulties facing a council that wishes to make up a private street, and she mentioned in particular the need for consent, the problem of transitional finance, and the problem for some householders of meeting the costs. That may express itself in opposition to the making up.

On the need for consent, I hope that I have made it clear that there is no legal requirement for unanimity or, indeed, any consent by the frontagers, although a sensible council will, of course, take their views into account.

On transitional finance, my hon. Friend suggested the use of the private finance initiative. I fear that it is unlikely that PFI would be appropriate for this type of relatively small-scale transaction, although I have no objection to councils exploring it. I hope that I have explained the measures that a council may adopt in cases of hardship. Those measures may include payment by instalments.

As I have said, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for enabling the House to consider this issue. There is enough flexibility in the existing system to allow sensible decisions to be taken, and I hope that what I have said will go a good way towards meeting my hon. Friend's concerns.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister clearly read her words verbatim without rehearsal or prior knowledge. May we be assured that the discourtesy of switching briefs at the last minute to avoid embarrassment does not occur again?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have already dealt with that point of order in part. The way in which Ministers respond to debates is entirely a matter for them.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes to Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 4 November 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Criminal Justice System

1. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** What are his priorities for the Scottish criminal justice system; and if he will make a statement. [12038]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): Our overriding priority is to enable the people of Scotland to live in safety under the protection of the law. We are taking measures to prevent crime, detect offenders, deal with cases quickly and efficiently, assist witnesses and victims of crime and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer. I am sure that he will want to confirm that it is his intention that the Scottish criminal justice system should be seen to be independent and free from political manoeuvres. If so, will he explain the context of the transfer of Jason Campbell from a Scottish prison to the Maze in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Dewar: The application by Jason Campbell was made under the Criminal Justice Act 1961. Requests for transfers in the prison system are not uncommon and there is a normal route by which they are dealt with. I naturally regret the fact that, on this occasion, wider considerations meant that consideration of the details of the application was not perhaps as thorough as it might have been. We have instituted a very thorough review of the circumstances and exactly what happened. As a result of that, we are ensuring that there will be ministerial consideration of all transfers between prisons jurisdictions in the United Kingdom. That will, I hope, ensure that there are no difficulties in future.

I should take this opportunity to say that I have enormous respect for the dignity and restraint that was shown by the victim's family in this case. It must have been a very difficult time for them, as I think everyone in the House will appreciate.

Mr. Godman: In our criminal justice system, the definition of a vulnerable person includes both a child and a person with learning disabilities. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when such a person or someone with a mental health problem is being interviewed by police officers, he or she should have the right to be accompanied by an appropriate adult? Does he agree that that ought to be one of his priorities?

Mr. Dewar: I certainly have a great deal of sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. I recognise that he has a long and proven track record of interest in such matters, especially the way in which children and young people are dealt with in the judicial system. I accept entirely that their protection is very important. They must not be put in a position where pressure can—perhaps inadvertently—be brought to bear on them. I am certainly happy to discuss with my hon. Friend how we can improve on present performance.

Mr. Wallace: The Secretary of State may recall that, in the dying days of the previous Parliament, my hon. Friends and I persuaded his predecessor to include in the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997 provisions which would improve the criminal justice system in Scotland by setting up a criminal cases review authority. Given that there have been much-trailed announcements that that might be about to become reality, is the Secretary of State in a position to make an announcement to the House today?

Mr. Dewar: I liked the judicious use of the words "persuaded my predecessor" of the value of the proposition. I do not want to be coy, but I do not want to steal anyone else's thunder. If the hon. Gentleman looks at Question 13, he will see that it is of direct relevance to the matter. He has not long to contain his curiosity.

Mr. Ancram: Following the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson), does the Secretary of State consider that the Scottish criminal justice system was well served by the shoddy Jason Campbell transfer affair? Will he explain why he has been able only to give a holding answer to the 11 simple, factual questions on the matter that I tabled for priority answer more than a week ago? Will he come clean about who took the original decision to transfer Campbell and whether at any stage he consented to that transfer? Does he realise that failure to come clean merely serves to heighten the stench of cover-up and political manipulation that permeates the incident and can only damage the integrity of the Scottish criminal justice system, which he has a duty to protect?

Mr. Dewar: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman should take that rather indignant line. In a previous political incarnation, he had much experience of prison transfers and of the wider implications for the Northern Ireland peace process. We will answer his questions, of course, but he should recognise that everyone acted in good faith in this matter. I have made that clear continually. I take responsibility for what happened and I have made that clear also.

Welfare to Work

2. **Mrs. McKenna:** What arrangements are in place to ensure high-quality training for young people in the welfare-to-work scheme. [12039]

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Quality will be built into all aspects of the new deal. Rigid monitoring will ensure that standards are maintained in training and in every other aspect of the welfare-to-work programme.

Mrs. McKenna: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of quality training for young people in the welfare-to-work programme. It is vital that young people feel comfortable with what is on offer and that they can acquire skills for the future. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to discuss with employers the best approach? I had a meeting with the major employers in my constituency, who were positive about the proposals. They wanted to be involved and supported what was on offer. They were happy that they were being consulted and that their expertise was being used to address any problems. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to carry out proper pilots and to involve all the young people and the employers, including local authorities, which are major employers in Scotland?

Mr. Wilson: I endorse my hon. Friend's comments. It is essential for the credibility of the welfare-to-work programme that everybody agrees that quality is the watchword. Young people are understandably sceptical, because they have seen various schemes come and go without much improvement in their prospects. It is essential to transcend the credibility gap if the welfare-to-work programme is to be a success. The watchword for that is co-operation and we are consulting widely with everybody who will be party to the programme, including local authorities.

Mr. Rowe: Does the Minister accept that a high proportion of the young people who need most help will enter the scheme well behind many of the other applicants? My inquiries in England show that the scheme makes no serious provision for lengthening the training for backward young people. Will he look into that problem?

Mr. Wilson: I have established a rule in Scotland—although I do not expect the hon. Gentleman to know about it—that we do not call the welfare-to-work programme a scheme. Incidentally, we also do not call people backward. An extensive programme is built into the gateway, which is crucial to getting everybody working by advising individual clients of the best possible option for them. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman wants that to succeed. For people with special difficulties in finding employment, we have a further education option to enhance their employability. Leaving aside his terminology, the hon. Gentleman is right to address the problems that such people face and we will address them through the new deal. I should be delighted to give him further information if he requires it.

Mr. Ernie Ross: My hon. Friend will know that Tayside is a pilot area and that the local authorities, the chamber of commerce and local employers have all been involved. More important, the young people who will be part of the new deal have also been involved. The report card for Tayside shows that Bob Alexander and his Employment Service team have done a marvellous job. This week, they will go out to pre-tendering and will have pre-contract meetings with commissioning bodies. We look forward to successful pathfinding for the new deal in Tayside.

Mr. Wilson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend not only for his comments, but for the hard work that both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, East (Mr. McAllion) are putting into this programme. The pilot areas are crucial to getting things right under welfare to work. In Tayside, as in the pilot areas in the south, the genuine problems and challenges that exist can be ironed out. We must get it right. The private sector is fully involved in Tayside, as is the local enterprise company and all the partners involved in delivering welfare to work with the Employment Service. There is a real opportunity and the Government are putting more than £300 million into the programme in Scotland alone—an indication of how seriously we take it. If we all work together, we have a one-off chance to break the curse of long-term unemployment once and for all.

Mr. Kirkwood: Does the Minister accept that high-quality training opportunities should be made available also to young people in rural areas? Will he assure the House that the £300 million programme—which is welcome for a scheme that we support so far as it goes—[HON. MEMBERS: "Not 'scheme.'"] Not a scheme—a programme. Will he assure the House that that £300 million will not be sucked into the central industrial belt? Since there are sanctions in the programme, which worry some of us, will he give an absolute guarantee that people in rural areas will not have those sanctions applied where transport costs are the only thing that makes them turn down opportunities which otherwise would be available to them?

Mr. Wilson: We are alert to the particular needs of people in rural areas. Some 400 people are eligible for the 18-to-25 aspect of the new deal in the borders and, by definition, they are spread out among a large number of communities. It is therefore entirely right that the hon. Gentleman should ask for the provision to be tailored to those individuals and to the characteristics of the area. Transport is important and should be built into the programme; one of the reasons for choosing Tayside as a pathfinder area is that it encompasses urban and rural areas.

Council of Ministers

3. **Mr. Cash:** If he will make a statement on his functions within the Council of Ministers. [12040]

Mr. Dewar: My functions within the Council of Ministers are those of any other Minister of the Crown—to discuss, negotiate and conclude agreements on behalf of the UK Government.

Mr. Cash: At the moment, the devolution proposals in the White Paper set out a series of devolved functions and reserved functions will be proposed by the devolution Bill. We also have a Human Rights Bill before the House of Lords and the European Communities (Amendment) Bill will come before the House of Commons next week. If there is a contradiction between the policy to be

pursued by Her Majesty's Government in the Council of Ministers and the proposals that may be made by the Scottish Parliament, which will prevail? Will the irreconcilability between these two positions be resolved by the three Bills to which I have referred?

Mr. Dewar: I say with some sorrow that the hon. Gentleman is becoming more gloomy about the state of human nature almost by the year. I do not see that irreconcilability built into the system. As he well knows, there is a United Kingdom delegation. No doubt differing points of view can on occasion be discussed, but common ground is reached and everyone joins to put the United Kingdom's case. Exactly the same process will occur. The United Kingdom remains the member state of the EU and the Scottish Executive will have an input in the formulation of policy. When an agreed policy position has been reached, it will be the job of the whole delegation to ensure that it is successfully pursued. I look forward to the opportunities that this process presents.

Mr. Home Robertson: I suppose that my right hon. Friend has a certain advantage in the Council of Ministers in that he shares the commitment of the rest of the Government to achieving the benefits that will flow from a successful single European currency. Will he convey the views of businesses in Scotland on that subject to all the factions in the Opposition?

Mr. Dewar: I am anxious to reflect properly the views of the business and commercial community in Scotland. I take the view—it may be thought to be partisan, but it is well founded—that it is easier to defend our position on Europe than the negative and, I would have thought, untenable position on which the Opposition are determined to stand.

Mrs. Ewing: Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the most critical industries dealt with by the Council of Ministers is the fisheries industry, which is important to the whole of the Scottish economy as well as to coastal communities?

Is the Secretary of State aware that a campaign has been launched today to raise the Sapphire from its known resting place in the North sea and that £100,000 has already been raised by the families' appeal? Will he, through the Council of Ministers, consider the possibility of matching funds if those funds will not come directly from Westminster?

Mr. Dewar: I accept the importance of the United Kingdom fishing industry and that of its Scottish component in particular. My noble Friend Lord Sewel was recently in Europe at a Fisheries Council meeting and will no doubt recognise and press that point.

I understand the hon. Lady's depth of concern about the Sapphire, as she represents a fishing community. I know from personal experience the deep distress of the families concerned. No one in the House, irrespective of our different political positions, would not feel for them and for their cause. The matter is being considered by my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, whose responsibility it is. They are considering a document—a report with which the hon. Lady will be very familiar—and it would not be for me to prejudge the outcome.

I am not sure of the practicalities of the European matter, so it would be very wrong of me to comment either way, but if the hon. Lady thinks that the proposition is practical and wants to make representations to other Departments, either directly or through me, I am sure that people would be prepared to listen.

Dr. Fox: When the Secretary of State meets his European colleagues, will he explain why the Scottish Office will have to pay for the fourth year of education for Greeks and the southern Irish but not for the English or the Northern Irish? Will he use the argument of his Minister for Education and Industry—that the English are rich and can afford it? If so, how would he categorise the Germans?

Mr. Dewar: I do not think that I will have to explain that point to my European colleagues because they will know that the matter is founded on the European agreements and is a responsibility that we accept as a member of the European Union. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would want us to recognise our obligations. We are anxious to ensure that there is opportunity in Scottish higher education. That is the point of the changes that are being introduced—to finance and make possible the expansion that we all favour so that this nation can remain competitive and flourish through the depth of its talent and its innovation.

Local Government Finance

4. **Mr. Gorrie:** What representations he has received about the resources required by councils to provide their statutory services. [12041]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Malcolm Chisholm): My right hon. Friend and I have met a number of councils to discuss their financial positions. We have also received letters on the subject from hon. Members, local councillors and members of the public.

Mr. Gorrie: Does the Minister agree that the Government's insistence on keeping to Conservative spending plans will cause severe cuts in essential services in almost all councils, as they follow year after year of cuts, and that it will be even worse if the Government require some councils to help to bail out others, such as Glasgow, which have a funding deficit?

Mr. Chisholm: Neither the media nor the hon. Gentleman have understood the issue perfectly. Our proposals have nothing whatever to do with helping Glasgow, with the effectiveness of service delivery in any one authority, or with taking existing resources away from any authority.

The problem is that many changes in distribution are in the pipeline because of the mismatch and the changes to the formula for distributing social work grant. We are determined to act for two reasons. First, distribution is an imperfect science and it is therefore right in principle that changes should be phased in. Secondly, and more important, distributional changes primarily affect not service levels, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, but council

tax levels. We are determined to protect council tax payers from massive increases flowing purely from distributional changes.

Mr. Russell Brown: Will my hon. Friend give the House an update on the current discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the recent study of social work allocations? Will he recognise the need for stability for local authorities? Will he bear that principle in mind when looking to future years?

Mr. Chisholm: The social work changes to which my hon. Friend refers are an important component of the distributional changes. It is right to recognise that there has been controversy about that, but the consensus view is that the changes should be introduced, but further reviewed. We will continue to review and monitor the social work changes and we will continue to review distributional formulas across the board. [HON. MEMBERS: "Who loses?"] There will be some losers and some gainers in terms of distribution. That will affect not service levels, but council tax levels—and it is council tax payers whom we are determined to protect.

Mr. Ancram: Does the Minister agree that concern about resourcing local councils is balanced by concern about the way in which some of them, including Renfrew and Glasgow, use those resources to conduct their affairs? Does he agree that allegations of sleaze against those councils are rightly matters of public concern? In that context, could he explain why the Secretary of State has not responded to my calls to set up public and independent investigations into the allegations? Does he not realise that in these days of Labour spin doctoring, internal party investigations will carry no credibility? Will he set up a public investigation, or is he frightened of what that public investigation might reveal?

Mr. Chisholm: There are no grounds for setting up a public investigation because there has been no breach of statutory duty. The Labour party, however, is taking firm and decisive action as a party on all these matters. Moreover, the Government have responded positively to the Nolan committee report on aspects of local government conduct. Following consultation, we will introduce and announce measures that flow from that. In terms of delivery of service, the best-value regime instituted by the Government will result in the continuing better use of resources in local government.

Prison Places

5. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** What estimate he has made of the number of extra prison places he expects to create in the next five years. [12042]

Mr. Dewar: On present plans, some 700 extra prisoner places will be created over the next five years.

Mrs. Winterton: Bearing in mind the Government's pledge to be tough on crime and the recent statement by the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson) that sentences should mean what they say, will the Secretary of State confirm whether it is the Government's policy to follow their predecessors' policy and end automatic early release from prison, or have they gone soft on that as well? What are the implications for extra prison places in future?

Mr. Dewar: We are, of course, looking carefully at the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997 and we have implemented some of the important provisions we felt were justified and could be implemented immediately. The hon. Lady has referred particularly to parole. I am not in favour of implementation of the changes at this stage because I have respect for the Prison Service and because we need to ensure that inmates have an incentive to behave well and to obey the rules. We had very unfortunate experiences in the past—the hon. Lady is, like me, enough of a veteran to remember them—when that incentive was destroyed and I would not like to revisit that experience. We will use our judgment and consider what is right for the criminal justice system of Scotland, for the public and for those working in the system.

Mr. Browne: A new prison is to be built in my constituency. Welcome as the job opportunities it brings are, I believe that it is about time we moved on from the Tory obsession with prison building and longer sentences. Is it not about time that we started looking at law and order in a much wider context? Is it not a sad reality that the consumption of alcohol is closely related to crime and criminal behaviour? Is it not important, and probably more effective, to have proper public health programmes and social programmes to tackle the causes rather than to concentrate only on prison building and sentencing?

Mr. Dewar: I have some sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. As the daily prison population in Scotland has risen very substantially, causing considerable problems for the Prison Service, it is important that we should examine sensibly the alternatives to custodial care. That is not a soft option, as Conservative barrackers will shout, but a matter of prevention and of dealing with matters such as alcohol abuse properly; hence the new powers on drinking in public places that we have introduced and our attempts to improve facilities for treating the alcohol problem both in and out of the prison system. We are also considering other measures, such as the tagging system. That was once controversial, but I believe that it is right to have pilot tests in Scotland.

Sir Robert Smith: On the expansion of prison places, does the Secretary of State yet have an estimate of the date by which he will have tackled the problem of overcrowding in Scottish prisons?

Mr. Dewar: As the hon. Gentleman recognises, we face a problem in that respect, although it is perhaps not as acute as in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is not an excuse for ignoring or not attempting to tackle it, but I am chary of setting arbitrary dates because I am aware of the increase in the prison population. While the Bowhouse project and the 700 places in the next five years to which I referred should take much of the strain, it may be that the impact on time cannot be exactly judged for the reasons that I have given. I spent some time yesterday with the Parole Board, which brought me sharply face to face with the problems that it encounters and the stress of its increasing work load. I pay tribute to its work, which is largely unsung and often unappreciated by the wider public.

Health Service

6. **Mr. Garnier:** What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health about the use of the private finance initiative to finance new capital projects in the Scottish health service. [12043]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Sam Galbraith): I meet my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health regularly. We have on occasion discussed the use of the private finance initiative for financing capital projects in the NHS in Scotland.

Mr. Garnier: Until 1 May, the Labour party opposed the PFI. What has made it change its mind?

Mr. Galbraith: The hon. and learned Gentleman's memory is vague; he is mistaken. The Labour party originated the PFI, and we are developing it. We consider it a useful way to increase capital in parts of the health service. In the health service in Scotland, we have three substantial projects nearing financial completion.

Skye Bridge

7. **Mr. Charles Kennedy:** If he will make a statement on progress in reducing the Skye bridge tolls. [12044]

Mr. Dewar: Since my announcement on 4 July, which was widely welcomed, negotiations have been in progress about the changes to the very complex agreement that we inherited. The principle of reducing tolls is accepted by the parties, but the matters of detail are taking longer to finalise than I had hoped. I am, however, confident that I shall be able to announce the introduction of discounted tolls at an early date.

Mr. Kennedy: I thank the Secretary of State for that helpful reply and, through him, wish to express my thanks for the helpful and constructive response of the Lord Advocate in dealing with some of the local implications of the matter. I underscore that there is anxiety that the contract—I appreciate that it does not have the signature of the Secretary of State on it and that the problem is not of his making but was inherited from his predecessor—gives stalling powers to the private company, which I suspect is instinctively none too happy about any toll reduction package and its consequent commercial impact. Does he agree that the matter needs to be re-examined? I hope that the Public Accounts Committee will consider it in more detail in due course. The more we see of the matter, the more it commercially and politically stinks.

Mr. Dewar: I offer this consolation to the hon. Gentleman. Although the details have been difficult and the negotiations have taken longer than I would have liked and are not yet complete, it is fair to say that they were entered into in good faith after an agreement in principle about what we are trying to achieve. I hope that we will not have too long to wait before I can report success in the matter. The important thing is to ensure that we get the discounts, which will be a considerable advantage to regular users, in place as soon as possible. The Public Accounts Committee will consider the technicalities of the contract and the National Audit Office report, but as the hon. Gentleman knows this was an early PFI project right at the beginning of the process—and perhaps at the start of the learning curve.

Local Government Finance

8. **Mr. McAllion:** What recent discussions he has held with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities relating to the financing of Scottish local government. [12045]

Mr. Chisholm: My right hon. Friend and I have discussed the financing of Scottish local government with the convention on a number of occasions. The most recent meetings were held on 13 October and 3 November. We next meet the convention on Friday 7 November.

Mr. McAllion: My hon. Friend will know that the funding mismatch imposed on Scottish local government by Tory reorganisation, allied to the middle-class drift away from cities such as Dundee and Glasgow to adjoining areas with lower council taxes, has left city councils trying to provide what is effectively a regional level of service from a greatly reduced council tax base. Therefore, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on facing those hard realities by trying to broker with COSLA a financial settlement that is fair to all of Scotland? Will he take the opportunity to denounce the simplistic, divisive and dishonest spouting of those who claim that spendthrift councils are being bailed out by penny-wise councils?

Mr. Chisholm: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the position of Dundee council. As I said in a previous answer, there will be losers and gainers from the changes to the social work formula that are in the pipeline and the phasing out of the mismatch. Without those changes, quite apart from other factors, Dundee council tax payers would face an increased band E tax of £85 next year, council tax payers in Aberdeen would face an increase of £75 and those in the Western Isles would face an increase of £200—far more than in Glasgow. We have taken action because we believe that council tax payers must be protected from the extreme changes in council tax that flow from distributional changes. We support that, as do COSLA and the vast majority of council tax payers across Scotland.

Mr. Welsh: The Labour policy of underfunding local services is increasing council taxes and massively cutting services, with more cuts to come, quite apart from the massive increases in water service charges. What sort of financial deal is that for Scottish consumers and tax payers?

Mr. Chisholm: The Government are committed to creating a strong and stable economy. A fundamental way of doing that is to make sure that we put public finances into good order in the early stages of the Government. That is why we said at the election that we would keep within overall public expenditure planning totals during our first two years in office. Even within that, we have managed to find £89 million more for education in Scotland, an extra £26.7 million for capital spending on schools in each of the next four years, and an additional £12.5 million this year and £43.7 million next year for housing. That demonstrates the Government's commitment to local government.

Mr. Connarty: Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the topics that he mentioned, and one that is often

mentioned by COSLA, is the financing of housing in Scotland? Does he agree that there are still major problems in respect of the quality of existing housing and the lack of housing for homeless people? Can he provide more figures to show that the Government are treating those difficulties seriously, in contrast to their derisory treatment by the previous Government?

Mr. Chisholm: Unlike the previous Government, we recognise the serious problems of Scottish housing, which were highlighted by the recent house condition survey. We have already taken action on a whole range of fronts to begin to tackle the problem. We announced the awards for the rough sleepers initiative to deal with the visible problem of people sleeping rough on the streets—an extra £16 million was provided for that purpose. We have already put £2 million into the empty homes initiative this year and there will be more next year to deal with the problem of empty homes. We have also earmarked £10 million this year for new housing partnerships and a much larger sum next year to lever in private money to complement the public resources that we are committed to putting into housing. That significant action has been warmly welcomed by the housing lobby across Scotland.

Mr. Fallon: Does the settlement with COSLA for next year make any provision for a minimum wage for council workers, and what is it?

Mr. Chisholm: Pay agreements are a matter for local authorities and their work forces. Local authorities know that we are committed to existing expenditure guidelines, apart from the extra money that I mentioned earlier. As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman knows, our general policy on a minimum wage is that the Low Pay Commission will advise on the rate for that in due course.

Scottish Parliament

9. **Mr. Dalyell:** What consultations he has had with (a) the Home Office, (b) the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and (c) the Department of Health on representation of the United Kingdom in the European Council by a Minister responsible to a Scottish Parliament. [12046]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): The Government's policy on involvement by Scottish Executive Ministers in meetings of the EU Council of Ministers is set out in the White Paper "Scotland's Parliament". That reflects full collective discussion and agreement.

Mr. Dalyell: Will chapter 5, paragraph 6 therefore be modified?

Mr. McLeish: I reflect on the comments made by my hon. Friend. We are optimistic that our position vis-a-vis Europe will be enhanced, not diminished, by the advent of devolution and a Scottish Parliament. It will provide for participation in Council of Ministers meetings and in developmental policy; it will provide much more time in the Scottish Parliament to discuss European Union affairs and for more effective scrutiny; and, of course, it will give us the possibility of a representative office in Brussels to ensure that Scotland's voice reflects the excellent service that we already get from the United Kingdom permanent representation.

Mr. Swayne: The Secretary of State participates in the United Kingdom Government's EU decision making as of right. My reading of the White Paper is that the Scottish Parliament will do so by invitation. How will Scotland's voice be heard when the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Parliament disagree? Can the Minister avoid giving me the same answer that he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash)—that we shall always agree?

Mr. McLeish: I shall set aside the cynical and pessimistic tone in respect of the future of a Scottish Parliament, and instead make it clear that the creation of a Scottish Parliament will enhance our participation in European Union activities. I made the point earlier that members of the Scottish Executive will participate in meetings of the Council of Ministers and in full discussions with the United Kingdom Parliament and Government on aspects of policy. The hon. Gentleman has simply got it wrong.

Mr. Swinney: Will the Minister speculate that, if the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis had occurred after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, a Minister for agriculture responsible to the Scottish Parliament would have had the power to negotiate a separate deal for the agricultural community within Scotland?

Mr. McLeish: It is not wise to speculate in the House. The current responsibilities of Scottish Office Ministers will be transferred to the new Parliament and to the new Executive. It is important to reinforce the Government's central message: that, in our judgment, doing that will enhance the activities of agricultural affairs in Scotland vis-a-vis Europe and in relation to the many pressing issues that we confront in our day-to-day activities in Scotland.

Health Trusts

10. **Mr. Donohoe:** What progress he has made in respect of the proposals to reduce the number of health trusts in Scotland. [12047]

Mr. Galbraith: I have made clear my intention to reduce the number of trusts in Scotland. There is, however, no pre-determined blueprint regarding the configuration of trusts in Scotland. Any major reconfiguration will need to await the publication of the White Paper on the NHS in Scotland and the outcome of Sir David Carter's review of acute services.

Mr. Donohoe: I am grateful for that reply. What savings have already been made in the trusts in Scotland since the Government were elected? Will my hon. Friend give an assurance that that efficiency drive will continue?

Mr. Galbraith: As my hon. Friend will know, at the start of the Government's term of office, we were able to announce £10 million to go towards waiting lists from efficiency savings within the structure of the NHS in

Scotland. We are also involved in trying to ensure that major efficiencies are achieved within the trusts in relation to such issues as purchasing, accounting, personnel matters and so on. We are making significant progress and shall continue to do so. Our aim is to ensure that every penny spent in the NHS is spent wisely and for the benefit of patients.

Mrs. Ray Michie: While the Minister is conducting that exercise, will he bear it in mind that Argyll and Bute NHS trust delivers a unique and localised service to remote rural and island areas? Does he recall that, under the last Government, efforts were made to manage the service from the central belt but, when jobs were moved from Lochgilphead to Paisley, it did not work and they were all moved back? I hope that he can give an assurance that that sort of nonsense will never happen again.

Mr. Galbraith: I am very aware about, and sympathetic to, what the hon. Lady has said. We must avoid what happened last time, when there was a blueprint for the health service in the UK. There are different areas, geographies, social structures and cultures, and we shall have different solutions for those. We shall lay down the principles; it is up to local areas to determine how to implement them.

Scottish Parliament

11. **Mr. Canavan:** If he will make a statement about progress of the Government's plans for a Scottish Parliament. [12048]

Mr. McLeish: Our proposals to establish a Scottish Parliament will be introduced in the House as soon as possible. We are also making progress in finding a site for the Parliament. I can today announce that three design feasibility studies have been commissioned into the possible sites at Calton hill, Leith and Haymarket, and quantity surveyors have been commissioned to prepare independent costings. We have also appointed consultants to undertake a transport and environmental impact assessment of the options.

I shall provide later this afternoon further information in a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross).

Mr. Canavan: I congratulate my hon. Friend and the Secretary of State on the leading part that they played in achieving a magnificent victory in the referendum campaign. Now that a Scottish Parliament is on its way, does my hon. Friend agree that it would be wrong for this Parliament to pre-empt decisions on matters that will be the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament? Therefore, will the Government refer the issue of student grants and student fees to the Scottish Parliament, which will take a more enlightened view than this place does?

Mr. McLeish: My hon. Friend will accept the notion I hope, that we must continue to govern. The Scottish Parliament will have a substantial agenda, but hard choices and decisions that have to be made now will have to be taken. This is the first time that we have been able to celebrate in the House the magnificent victory of 11 September. It is important for the Conservatives to remember that 2.44 million Scots and people living in Scotland voted, and that 1.77 million of them—75 per cent. or nearly three to one—voted for a Parliament. I am sure that the Opposition will take that on board.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Modernisation of the House

30. **Dr. Tony Wright:** If she will make a statement on the future work in modernising the House. [12023]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): Following its report on the legislative process and the Order Paper in July, the Committee will consider further voting procedures, the parliamentary calendar, the conduct of debate and the scrutiny of European documents.

Dr. Wright: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. I congratulate the Committee and my right hon. Friend on the excellent work that they have already done, which can be seen in the quality of the Order Paper before us today.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that how the House has considered legislation in the past has been nothing short of a disgrace? It has enabled party games to triumph over proper scrutiny. Whatever model of reform the Committee comes up with, whether it is Special Standing Committees or pre-legislative hearings, it must achieve the objective of improving legislative scrutiny. It may make life harder for Ministers, but it must improve the quality of what the House does.

Mrs. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about the Order Paper. The changes that we have introduced have been widely welcomed throughout the House. On his main point about the importance of scrutiny of legislation, I agree that we have had insufficient scrutiny on many occasions in the past. I hope that, when we as a Government stick by our commitment to publish seven Bills in draft this year, some Committees will be able to look at those Bills in draft and enhance the quality of the legislation that follows.

Mr. Boswell: Is the President satisfied that this summer's consideration of the Finance Bill took place over a total of 12 days compared with the 77 days of consideration of the last Finance Bill, under the previous Government? If she is not satisfied, will she take steps with her colleagues to ensure that such a compressed timetable never happens again?

Mrs. Taylor: The majority of people in the House are satisfied with the scrutiny of the Finance Bill, and it certainly has not been discussed by the Modernisation Committee.

Mrs. Dunwoody: It is precisely because the previous Government played ducks and drakes with our rights in the House that it is very important that these changes should be only to the advantage of the taxpayer and the voter. Will my right hon. Friend therefore give a simple

undertaking that no procedural change, especially in the Committee sector, will go ahead that will in any way limit the rights of the Back Bencher either to raise or to examine in some detail any number of points in legislation, or to place probing amendments on the agenda?

Mrs. Taylor: The recommendations made by the Modernisation Committee were made after discussion of papers submitted by many people in the House—for the most part, people with considerable experience on the Back Benches. I think that the recommendations that we have made do reflect the desire of Back Benchers for change in the way that we propose.

Mr. Tyler: Will the President address the question of the possible implications of recommendations of the Modernisation Committee that she chairs—a Committee on which I have the pleasure to serve—for the way in which our staff are employed in the House? They give very loyal and very efficient service to the House, but in recent months there have been notable failures in consultation, especially with the doorkeepers and, I understand, with the postal staff. Can the President give us an absolute assurance that no changes to the ways in which the House proceeds will be implemented without proper consultation with the appropriate staff?

Mrs. Taylor: Such a question would be more appropriately put to the House of Commons Commission than to myself, but I shall ensure that the hon. Gentleman's points are raised.

Speeches (Time Limits)

31. **Mr. Pickthall:** What consideration she has given to time-limiting all contributions to debates in the Chamber. [12024]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Standing Order gives the Chair wide discretion to impose the 10-minute limit when the number wishing to speak justifies it. I am not convinced that there is a need to limit all contributions in that way.

Mr. Pickthall: Is not one of the most infuriating experiences for any Back Bencher that of, having prepared a contribution for a debate, spending as long as several hours sitting in the Chamber waiting to deliver that contribution, only to find that the opportunity is lost because several senior colleagues, higher up the batting order, have spent 30 or 40 minutes delivering their wisdom to the House? That experience has been the lot of several hon. Members waiting to deliver their maiden speech. Does she not consider that, when many hon. Members wish to speak in a debate, a 20-minute time limit on Front Benchers and a 10-minute time limit for everyone else is reasonable, given that we would need some injury time or time added on?

Mrs. Taylor: When a 10-minute limit is imposed, it applies to all Members, be they Privy Councillors or the newest Back Benchers. I think there is concern that, on occasion, certain Members tend to speak for excessively long periods when others want to make contributions. The Modernisation Committee will consider the whole subject of the conduct of debate, and it will be for the Committee to consider ideas such as that which my hon. Friend has mentioned: injury time to encourage interventions or promote intervention when there is a 10-minute limit. Many people will have sympathy with him on that score, because I believe that we have all, at some time, sat through a debate without being able to participate.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am glad that the right hon. Lady made her last point. Does she agree that spontaneity is terribly important in debate and that, if Members cannot intervene, the lifeblood of debate drains away? Surely we do not want a series of Members delivering pre-prepared speeches, never giving way and not replying spontaneously to other speeches?

Mrs. Taylor: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Interventions and spontaneity are important because they are the only thing that ever makes anyone change their mind. If that happens rarely, so be it, but at least an opportunity exists. I believe that the point that my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) made about the possibility of injury time should be considered carefully, although we do not want to do anything that would allow abuses of the overall purpose of a 10-minute limit. The Committee can usefully look into that.

Modernisation of the House

32. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to implement the recommendations contained in the first report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons (HC190, Session 1997–98). [12027]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Committee reported on 23 July, and a debate on its conclusions is to be held in the near future.

Sir Sydney Chapman: Given that the Government are committed, as a result of the Labour party manifesto, to making Parliament more relevant and more effective—that was the reason for establishing the Modernisation Committee—does the right hon. Lady not think, on reflection, that the Government's actions since 1 May have had the opposite effect, and indeed diminished Parliament? She must recall that her Government introduced a guillotine before the Second Reading debate on a Bill, changed the format of Prime Minister's Question Time without any consultation with the House, and spin-doctored important statements to the media ahead, and instead, of giving them in the Chamber. On reflection, does the right hon. Lady not think that those issues are more important than the very welcome introduction of a new and easier-to-read daily agenda?

Mrs. Taylor: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the new and easier-to-read daily agenda. I reject his basic presumption that we have not introduced useful changes. Hon. Members worked extremely hard between the election and the summer recess to pass a record number of pieces of legislation. I think that we are finding ways for hon. Members to make extremely important and useful contributions both to debates and in Select Committees.

Mr. Skinner: Is it not a bit rich for Tory Members to complain about not having sufficient time to consider legislation and about the Government's introduction of guillotines when the House of Commons would have risen at about 7.30 pm one night last week if a succession of Labour Members had not kept the debate going until its usual 10 pm completion? Last night, that great Opposition—as they like to call themselves—allowed the House to rise at 8 o'clock. I have news for them: in the old days, we used to sit all night at least once every week—and sometimes we would have two or three all-night sittings a week. I cannot stomach the idea that Tory Members are so anxious to get away from this place that they cannot stay the course. In the old days, Members of Parliament used to be here for many more days. There is a bit of hypocrisy.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is not showing his characteristic generosity to Opposition Members. He should understand that they have had other things on their minds in recent weeks.

Thursday Sittings

33. **Mr. Bennett:** If she will introduce proposals to start sittings at 2 pm on Thursdays. [12028]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I have no plans to do so at present, but the Modernisation Committee will consider the matter with other suggestions when it examines the parliamentary calendar. My hon. Friend has written to the Committee about the proposal and we shall look at it.

Mr. Bennett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does she accept that one of the great successes of the Jopling Committee—I am speaking as one of the few remaining Members of Parliament who served on it—was to convince the House to be flexible with its sitting hours? If the Opposition are so keen to scrutinise constitutional matters on the Floor of the House, will my right hon. Friend give some thought to the possibility of the House sitting on Tuesday and Thursday mornings? Does she accept that, if we sat half an hour earlier on a Thursday, we could rise half an hour earlier? It would make a tremendous difference if those who must travel back to the north of England, Scotland and Wales could leave at 6.30 rather than 7 pm and thus avoid the difficult scramble to get trains and planes.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend makes a legitimate point, although I am not sure that starting earlier on Thursday would guarantee an earlier finish. That point can be examined by the Modernisation Committee, as can my hon. Friend's very interesting idea that the House could sit in Committee on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Those ideas are worth further investigation.

Regional Affairs

34. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** If she will move to provide for an additional Sub-Committee of the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee to consider regional affairs; and if she will make a statement. [12029]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Select Committee has already been given the power to appoint two Sub-Committees. It is up to the Committee to decide how to choose inquiries within its terms of reference.

Mr. O'Brien: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response, and I congratulate her on the way in which the Select Committees were established so soon after the general election. I raise the issue of a Sub-Committee for the regions because much importance is attached to the development of the regions. I believe that we should reach a statutory agreement on the way that we approach the regions question. We should be able to take specific evidence to a Sub-Committee regarding the Government's progress in implementing and introducing regional agencies. Against that background, I ask my colleague to consider the matter, which is important to people in the regions.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is aware that the Committee has two Sub-Committees, because it was formed by the merger of two previous Select Committees. I do not deny what he says about the importance of the regions, and there will be legislation on the topic later in this Session. However, I remind him—he is a member of the Transport Sub-Committee—that either of the Sub-Committees or the Committee itself could have an inquiry into any aspect of regional development that was relevant to the policy of that Department, so the Committee is not excluded from the kind of investigation that he thinks may be necessary.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the right hon. Lady look seriously at the way in which we can hold regional offices of Government to account? The Government have a proposal for regional government in London, to take place from 2000, which is very welcome, but not as yet in any other regions of England. Civil servants have no direct accountability to anybody, although across all Departments they wield great power. Will the right hon. Lady allow time for thinking through the implications of the question asked by the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien), as that would be widely welcomed by English Members?

Mrs. Taylor: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I would not close my mind to considering alternative ways of making people accountable. However, I emphasise again that the Select Committee in question could examine that as a topic and could make recommendations if it considered that appropriate.

UN Observers (Iraq)

3.31 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Madam Speaker, you gave me permission to raise under Standing Order No. 24 the dangerous situation in Iraq. This is not a kite-flying statement, but a genuine request to you to consider whether or not the House of Commons should have its say before any blood is spilt, rather than react to horror. I acknowledge the presence of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), who has responsibility for the middle east.

I must persuade you of three things: that the matter is definite, urgent and important. It is definite in that Iraq has refused American observers and investigators. Iraq has threatened to shoot down surveillance aircraft. There are moves in Washington to take unilateral action, and not only the extreme views of Newt Gingrich but those of others make this a dangerous cocktail.

I argue that the matter is urgent in that, by the time the House of Commons meets tomorrow, this country could be supporting military action, if not participating in it. In the public print, we read that 10 Downing street staff have agreed British support with their White House equivalents. This is still a parliamentary democracy, not a presidential country, and the House of Commons ought to be consulted before one British soldier, sailor or airman is committed to armed conflict.

The matter is important because Saddam Hussein may not be averse to military action. In 1993, like every other visitor to Baghdad, I was taken on the first morning there to the Amariya—the shelter where hundreds of women and children were charred and scorched to death by a cruise missile. That is used by the regime—possibly understandably so, but nevertheless used—to support its own view of the world.

When one sees, in the children's hospital in Baghdad, hundreds of infants—I exaggerate not—expiring in one's presence as a result of sanctions, it leads one to think that at least one should talk to the Iraqis about the imposition of sanctions. If not to the Iraqis, one should certainly talk to the French, the Russians and the Chinese, as well as the Arab League. Military action could have reverberations, and the Government ought to hear what the Commons thinks—

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has been allowed the time allocated to him under Standing Order No. 24. I have, of course, listened carefully to what he has said. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I must give my decision without giving any reason for it. I regret that I do not consider that the matter raised is appropriate for discussion under the Standing Order. I therefore cannot submit the application to the House.

Points of Order

3.34 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Is it in order for the President of the Board of Trade to refuse to answer a parliamentary question—in this instance, from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood)—even though to provide an answer would entail only 10 minutes of the right hon. Lady's diary secretary's time, and would involve neither excessive expense nor any risk to our national security?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman must give me details of such a situation. I cannot give him a yes-or-no answer without being fully informed of what he is talking about, which I am not at present.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will recall that on Question 1, I asked the Secretary of State for Scotland whether he was able to make an announcement about criminal cases and the review authority for Scotland. I was told to exercise some patience, because his hon. Friend the Minister of State would reveal all when answering Question 13. Of course, we did not reach Question 13. Is there any chance of extra time, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker: I wish there were. I shall let the hon. Gentleman into a little confidence, if I may. When the Scottish Office team were leaving, I observed that we did not make the progress on Scottish questions that I had hoped we would. That being so, I make the general point that I hope that we shall make better progress in future on Scottish questions. Perhaps I can be helped by Back Benchers as well as those on the Front Benches. Perhaps, also, those on the Treasury Bench will let the Scottish Office team know what I have said.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Further to the first point of order, Madam Speaker. The question was a simple one, based on how many days the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry had spent in her office between 1 August and 5 October. May I have the exact criteria for not answering the question? I understand that national security or excessive cost must be involved. Tracking down the Beckett family caravan surely does not fall into either of those categories.

Madam Speaker: I shall want to know the full situation. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said that he would write to me about the matter. I shall look into it and respond. I have no idea how many hours or days the President of the Board of Trade spent in her office, and I cannot be expected to respond until I have undertaken my research. I open my mouth in the House only when I have a proper answer to give, not to state something that I imagine.

Division No. 79 (Corrected Figures)

MR. JON OWEN JONES (LORD COMMISSIONER TO THE TREASURY) *and* MRS. MARGARET EWING, *who acted as Tellers in Division No. 79 on Monday 3 November, came to the Table.*

Mr. Jones: We have to inform the House that the numbers voting "Aye" in Division No. 79 yesterday on the Third Reading of the Education (Student Loans) Bill were reported in error by us as 283. The number voting "Aye" was 293.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. I shall see that the correction is made in the *Journal*. I hope that this will not happen again.

Prohibition of Bull Bars

3.38 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I beg to move,

That leave be given bring in a Bill to prohibit the fitting of bull bars to motor vehicles.

Those of us who go into public life are often influenced in our attitudes by our personal experiences. These may turn on the great issues of the day such as the level of taxation and our relationship with other countries or the future of the welfare state, or on something specific.

Nearly five years ago, I stopped my car in Bury St. Edmunds to allow someone else to park. In my rear-view mirror, I spotted a 4x4 vehicle heading towards me. It soon became apparent that it would not stop, and seconds later the inevitable collision took place. I remained calm, because my vehicle, a Volvo estate car, had a reinforced outer steel chassis and was regarded as the safest car manufactured.

I got out of the car to examine the damage. The 4x4 vehicle, fitted with bull bars, was undamaged. On superficial examination, the damage to my estate car did not seem great. It was taken away, however, to be properly examined. I was horrified to be informed subsequently that such was the damage from the bull bars that the chassis had buckled. In fact, the car was effectively written off. I was truly shocked, because it struck me: if bull bars could destroy a Volvo estate car, what could they do to a child's head? As a father of young children, I found the prospect sickening.

In Germany, it has been established that a vehicle could kill a child while travelling at 20 mph. Fitted with bull bars, a death could result at 12 mph, or even as low as 10 mph. The Transport Research Laboratory has indicated that the number of fatalities or serious accidents arising directly from bull bars is quite limited. Others take a different view. The truth is that nobody really knows. What we do know, however, is that, without any doubt, some children have tragically lost their lives through bull bar-related accidents. It has been fully documented.

Bull bars were invented in Australia, in the outback, to prevent serious accidents with kangaroos. Well, there are no kangaroos in Britain. Even in Australia, bull bars are being banned in urban areas.

Given the evidence, it is very disappointing that bull bars are still legal in Britain. Over a number of years, the Department of Transport has sought a way forward with the European Commission, but progress has been lamentably slow. Sweden and Finland object to the ban. Apparently, in Lapland there is a risk of colliding with moose or reindeer. In Britain there are no moose and very few reindeer. It seems extraordinary that the apparent needs of a small corner of Europe should mean no progress elsewhere. Whatever happened to subsidiarity? Jersey and Cyprus have simply gone ahead and banned bull bars, and those bans have not been challenged.

I am delighted that the Department of Transport has issued a comprehensive consultation document. The possibility exists for unilateral national action. The Automobile Association and Royal Automobile Club oppose bull bars. They are not used in royal parks, and large commercial delivery organisations, such as DHL, have banned them. A number of insurers refuse to cover vehicles that are fitted with bull bars. Overwhelmingly,

[Mr. Richard Spring]

public opinion is moving against them. I applaud the efforts of successive Road Safety Ministers to move towards a ban—now, most notably, Baroness Hayman.

My Bill affords the opportunity to ban bull bars. This is not a party political issue. Sponsors of the Bill come from the three main political parties. I hope that the Government will support the Bill, but, if not, that they will find another route to get them banned. Talking of road safety is like approving of motherhood and apple pie. How can one be against it? In Britain, we have a good track record, which could only be enhanced by the successful enactment of the Bill into law. This is quite specific, and will make a difference.

In other parliamentary traditions, the name of the main promoter of the Bill is sometimes attached to the new law. I say this not for myself but because, if that tradition existed in the House, the Bill, if passed, might well be called the Flynn law, after the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn). He has tried twice, unsuccessfully, to move this process on. In so doing, he has greatly highlighted this issue in the public domain. I applaud him once again today.

The time has come to remove these ugly, dangerous and offensive devices from our roads. The blunt truth is that bull bars are not fashion accessories; they are killing accessories.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Richard Spring, Mr. John Austin, Mr. Alan Duncan, Mr. Paul Flynn, Mr. Christopher Fraser, Mr. Andrew George, Mr. Nick Hawkins, Mr. John Hutton, Sir Peter Lloyd, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. David Ruffley and Mr. Desmond Swayne.

PROHIBITION OF BULL BARS

Mr. Richard Spring accordingly presented a Bill to prohibit the fitting of bull bars to motor vehicles: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 13 February, and to be printed [Bill 73].

Opposition Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Student Finance

Madam Speaker: I must inform the House that, on the two motions tabled by the Opposition, I have had to limit Back-Bench speeches to 10 minutes. I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.44 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): I beg to move,

That this House welcomes the expansion of higher education which has taken place in recent years; shares the view of the Dearing Committee that a further period of expansion is desirable; believes that part of the cost of this expansion should be met by students themselves, but agrees with the Dearing Committee that means-tested maintenance grants make an important contribution to improving access to higher education for students from low-income backgrounds and deeply regrets the Government's hurried decision to reject this advice; and finds incomprehensible the Government's proposal that students from other EU countries should be able to attend four-year courses at Scottish universities on terms more favourable than those available to home students living in England, Wales or Northern Ireland.

I am pleased that, on the first occasion when the Opposition have the opportunity to choose the subject for debate after our prolonged summer recess, my colleagues and I agreed that we should focus the attention of the House on the shambles that is the Government's higher education policy.

That subject was last discussed when the Secretary of State for Education and Employment came to the House at the end of July following the publication of the Dearing report. He came to the House within a matter of hours of the publication of that report in order to reject its key recommendations on the future of undergraduate student finance.

Dearing recommended, first, the continuation of means-tested maintenance grants in order to ease access for students from a low-income background. The Secretary of State announced that the Government were to reject that recommendation.

Secondly, Dearing recommended against the introduction of means-tested tuition fees, although the report considered it as option C. The Secretary of State came to the House of Commons to announce that, despite the Dearing report's recommendation that it be rejected, he and the Government would introduce means-tested tuition fees.

Thirdly, Dearing recommended that any income raised from students in order to finance the future growth of higher education should be ring-fenced to go into the higher education system. The Government have made it clear that that recommendation, too, is rejected.

The Secretary of State came to the House and disingenuously presented his policy as Dearing-plus. His policy was not Dearing-plus; his policy was to reject Dearing and substitute his own, or perhaps I should say the Treasury's, policy instead. His branding of that policy as Dearing-plus has fooled almost no one. I say "almost no one"; a week ago I would have said it had fooled no one, but it appears to have fooled the Prime Minister.

We saw last week, when my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State is embarrassed by the Prime Minister. I am not surprised. The Prime Minister was asked why the Government had rejected the Dearing report, and his reply was nothing short of astounding. The Prime Minister said:

"I made it clear throughout"—

by which he meant the election campaign—

"that we should abide by the recommendations of the Dearing committee".—[*Official Report*, 29 October 1997; Vol. 299, c. 892.]

I know that the Prime Minister is not a detail man, but as a statement that beggars belief. It is wrong on almost every count. It is not true that the Prime Minister made it clear throughout the election campaign that the Government intended to implement the Dearing report's recommendations. It is just as well that it is not true, because that is a policy that they will not carry out.

Last week, the Leader of the Opposition repeated to the Prime Minister his words during the election campaign, when he said:

"Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education."

That was not, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) might have said, a remark offered on a wet night in Dudley; it was a remark that was regularly repeated by people who are now senior Ministers.

On 24 April, not much more than a week before polling day, the right hon. Member for Livingston (Mr. Cook), now the Foreign Secretary, said:

"We are quite clear that tuition costs must be met by the state."

He went on to say that he was happy to predict that, if the Tories got back for a fifth term, they would start to charge students for tuition. It is a pity that he did not offer a prediction about what Labour would do if it was elected on 1 May.

Last week, the Prime Minister was wrong in his description of the Government's present policy. Furthermore, he was wrong in his recollection of what either he or his right hon. and hon. Friends said during the election campaign. That shambles at Prime Minister's Question Time last week was symptomatic of a much wider shambles that has pervaded this field of policy since the Secretary of State's rushed statement to the House in July, before the summer recess.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the Government did not publish their suggestions on how loans are to be paid back until the last day of the Labour party conference? To obtain that information on the day of the conference, Labour Back Benchers had to access it through the internet. The proposal was that, as soon as people earn £10,000 they will have to pay 9 per cent. of their income towards their loan. A student who has been on a four-year course will probably be paying back the loan for 30 years.

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is right about the timing of the publication of the details of that proposal. He is a trifle grudging in his representation of the Secretary of State's political skills. I am certain that the right hon. Gentleman was right to conceal that information from his party conference if he wanted to get the motion passed on the floor. It was a straightforward exercise in political management.

More important, my hon. Friend could have pointed out that not only was that information published at the very end of the Labour party conference, but it was denied to people whose opinions were being sought following the publication of the Secretary of State's recommendations at the end of July.

It is important to understand why this shambles arose. When he took office, the Secretary of State thought that he knew what Dearing intended to propose, and it was supposed to be relatively straightforward. All parties in the House supported the continued development of higher education. One of the aspects of our record in office of which I am most proud is the improved access to higher education between 1979 and 1997. I agree with Sir Ron Dearing and with the Secretary of State that continued development of higher education should be an objective of Government policy.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Is the shadow Secretary of State also proud of the Tory Government's record of a 40 per cent. reduction in spending per student in higher education?

Mr. Dorrell: The most important thing is to focus on the number of people who have had the opportunities afforded by high-quality higher education. One of the findings of the Dearing review was that the expansion of higher education allowed a dramatically increased number of people to take part, and, furthermore, that they had done so without undermining the quality of the system. That is a Dearing finding with which I agree.

The Secretary of State thought that this matter would be straightforward, and that there would be support for continued development of higher education. He also recognised that the financing of that continued growth required a contribution from students. He expected the Dearing committee to recommend the end of the maintenance grant as the means by which the student contribution to the growth of higher education would be financed. He hoped to be able to present it to the House and to the world as an uncomfortable but unavoidable fact.

The right hon. Gentleman expected the support of the Dearing report for that recommendation, and what he and his right hon. and hon. Friends said during the election campaign were weasel words. They made it clear that they would not introduce tuition fees. They were not expecting to do so, as they were hoping that Dearing would let them off the hook by recommending the ending of the maintenance grant.

The problem that the Secretary of State found when he came to office and actually read the Dearing report was that the Dearing review team did not perform their part of the bargain. They looked at the subject in depth, and concluded that the superficial analysis—to which the Secretary of State is still working—was wrong. The Dearing review is very explicit on that. At paragraph 20.66, it says:

"In going through that process"—

the process of review of the options—

"we"—

the members of the Dearing review—

"all changed and developed our views: we did not end up where we started."

It is a great pity that the Secretary of State did not allow himself and his colleagues in the Government sufficient time to go through the same process. In his anxiety to get

[Mr. Dorrell]

to the Floor of the House and announce a quick conclusion, the Secretary of State denied himself and his colleagues the opportunity to consider the evidence that led the Dearing team to a different conclusion from the one that they, the right hon. Gentleman and—probably—we expected when the Dearing review was established.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I share the right hon. Gentleman's criticism of the new Government's change of position and the misleading nature of their comments before the election. Just for the record, can it be made clear whether it is Conservative party policy that students should make a contribution to their fees?

Mr. Dorrell: I have already said—I was slightly surprised by the quiet in the House as I said it—that it was not a subject of dispute between the Government and Opposition Front-Bench teams that, if we are to see the continued growth of higher education, students need to participate in the financing of that growth. The question is how. The Dearing review examined the central options, which the Government have examined, and recommended against the conclusions that the Government reached. Let us examine why the Dearing review reached the conclusion that it did.

Dearing said that he was concerned about the problem of equitable access to higher education for students from a low-income background. When the Secretary of State came to the House in July, he said that he was also concerned about that subject. It is therefore strange that he should have rejected Dearing's recommendation to continue the means-tested maintenance grant, because Dearing recommended that it be continued precisely in order to address the problems of equitable access for students from low-income backgrounds.

There are some fairly startling figures in the Dearing report. Let us consider equivalently qualified students with two A-levels prior to entering higher education. Of people taking A-levels and securing two, 77 per cent. of those from high-income backgrounds go on to higher education. The equivalent figure for students from low-income backgrounds is 47 per cent. It is a responsibility of the taxpayer, through the Government, to seek to ensure that the playing field is made as level as it can be for students from low-income backgrounds, yet the Government have set their face firmly against that Dearing recommendation and analysis.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): All that the right hon. Gentleman has said is quite correct. I think that Dearing was absolutely shocked to discover that, although there had been a great increase in the number of people going into higher education, the number of those from lower socio-economic groups had hardly gone up at all. Does the right hon. Gentleman therefore accept that it was a mistake for his Government to move from full maintenance grants to 50 per cent. loans?

Mr. Dorrell: The issue is not a great inquiry about what happened over the past 18 years, but what the Government are going to do now. From the point of view of the hon. Lady's question, what the Government are going to do is take the record they inherited and make it a great deal worse. The Secretary of State's proposals will make it £2,265 more expensive for a student from a low-income background to do a three-year undergraduate course in England than it was on the day that the right hon. Gentleman took office.

The hon. Lady should address her question to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, whose proposals will make it more difficult for a student from a low-income background to finance a course of higher education than it is for a student from a middle or higher-income background.

That is the central charge against the Government. A high-income student will face a cost increase of £3,000 for a three-year course, but a low-income student will face a cost increase of £5,265. That is an extraordinary testament to the new Labour Government, and it is the central point that the Secretary of State must explain to his right hon. and hon. Friends, the student body and those who are responsible for managing the university sector, who do not share his analysis.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): The right hon. Gentleman has been on his feet for more than 15 minutes, and we have no idea what policy he would follow if he were Secretary of State for Education and Employment. Does he support the introduction of tuition fees, and does he believe that they should be means-tested?

Mr. Dorrell: I thought that I had made it clear that I do not support the Government's proposals, which are the subject of our debate today. It is an old tactic for Government Back Benchers—and the hon. Lady is a skilled exponent of it—whenever the Government are in difficulty, to ask the Opposition what they would do. This Parliament has four and a half years to run, and the hon. Lady should inquire of the Secretary of State how he will deliver the combined objectives of improved access to higher education and equitable access for students from a low-income background.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Willis *rose—*

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Rothwell) *rose—*

Mr. Dorrell: I must move on, but I will give way later.

The need for equitable access to degree courses is not the only reason why the Dearing proposals differed from those that the Government intend to introduce. The Dearing report also envisaged a more flexible system of higher education, that responded more accurately to the demands of students.

One of the reasons for Dearing's recommendations is made explicit in paragraph 20.68:

"We believe that"

these recommendations

"will enable students to be more demanding of institutions".

In other words, institutions should respond more directly to students whose support and custom they seek.

Dearing expected the creation of more diploma courses and more access to part-time courses, which already charge 25 per cent. of tuition costs as tuition fees. That is why Dearing made the recommendation he did on tuition

fees. He wished to avoid unnecessary and perverse distortions in the development of the system and, in particular, in the development of more diploma courses and more part-time courses. The Secretary of State's proposals will impede that development.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is curious that the hon. Members for Rochdale (Lorna Fitzsimons) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg)—both former prominent activists in the student movement and long-term opponents of tuition fees—have suddenly, and without explanation or apology, become supporters of the Government's policy? Does he agree that it is therefore significant that both hon. Members are absent from the Chamber?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is an old sparring partner of both hon. Members. It is significant that they have chosen not to attend today's debate to support their U-turn in person. They are too frightened of the authorities in Millbank tower to raise the voices that they have traditionally raised against the policy being advanced by the Secretary of State.

The final reason why Dearing recommended the policy is made explicit in the paragraph to which I have referred. Dearing feared that, if the student contribution was raised by the abolition of maintenance grant, the money might never reach the higher education institutions at all. The report stated:

"We fear that if public subsidies for maintenance are reduced, the funding released would not be redirected to higher education institutions."

It is not often that an official committee has its predictions proved so triumphantly right within two months of the publication of its report. But that is precisely the policy that the Government have now made clear—or more or less clear—they are to pursue. They will raise extra money from students, but they will not provide that money to the higher education sector.

Last Friday's edition of *The Times Educational Supplement* published a memo circulating within the Department which confirmed that the cash raised by the £1,000-a-year tuition fees will be redirected away from higher education. The memo said:

"The issue is sensitive—

you are telling me—

"because the £165 million package for 1998-99 does not allow universities to keep all the funds raised by the new £1,000 fees as extra income".

The memorandum makes it crystal clear that

"they retain £125 million out of an estimated £150 million."

Dearing recommended a set of proposals precisely to safeguard the university system against the manoeuvre that the Secretary of State has engaged in: to raise extra money from students, and use it to finance a deficit somewhere else in public expenditure. That is the charge against the Secretary of State—not only has he undermined equitable access, but he has done so under false pretences.

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): That is not true.

Mr. Dorrell: The Secretary of State says that that is not true. Is he saying that a memorandum circulating within his Department and written by civil servants is a Tory plant? These are the figures from the memorandum. Is he denying those figures? Will he come to the Dispatch Box and say that the figures in the memorandum are wrong? Will he explain to the House what the right figures are? I would be interested to hear his comments, and I shall give way to him.

The Secretary of State stays firmly in his seat. Clearly, he recognises that his officials' memorandum is right, and that the money raised from charging students will not go into the higher education system.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I entirely agree with the shadow Secretary of State that we need a clear statement from the Secretary of State on ring fencing. He has stated that the Conservative party's policy is clear—it is to accept Dearing in its entirety, including the £1,000 non-means-tested fees, regardless of income, for all parents. For the sake, therefore, of Tory party unity, will the right hon. Gentleman condemn the Tory party candidate in the Winchester by-election, who has just produced a leaflet which says:

"Gerry Malone has thrown his weight behind Winchester's students in their campaign against the introduction of tuition fees"?

Hon. Members: Oh!

Mr. Dorrell: I am absolutely delighted to endorse Gerry Malone as the Conservative candidate for Winchester, and I look forward to welcoming him back to the House of Commons as the next Member of Parliament for that constituency. He is right to insist that the Government should explain to the electorate of Winchester how they will deliver the objectives set out by the policy that they have introduced.

The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) is wrong to say that I have explicitly endorsed every detail of the Dearing report. The Government made a serious mistake, and I have demonstrated how they have tripped over themselves as a consequence—I have more to say on that. They were so anxious to get to this place to make an announcement that they did not read the Dearing report.

The Dearing report is a major piece of work and its recommendations should have been the subject of more serious analysis by the Secretary of State and the Government. Instead, at the end of July, we were presented with a few thoughts sketched out on the back of a couple of envelopes, and higher education policy developed on that basis during the summer. That was pretty obvious to any onlooker.

Let us consider the saga of the gap year students. Within days of the Secretary of State announcing the policy, we heard stories of students who were signed up for courses starting in autumn 1998 shifting to start in autumn 1997 to avoid being affected. Ministers were caught completely unawares.

On 7 August, the noble Baroness Blackstone, who was apparently left in charge while the Secretary of State took a well-earned holiday, dismissed as "irresponsible scaremongering" the hyping of fears that students who had deferred their entry to university until 1998 would bring it forward a year and be pushed into trying to take up places in autumn 1997. The noble Baroness said:

"This sort of irresponsible scaremongering helps no-one—neither the students, the universities, nor the admissions service."

[Mr. Dorrell]

On 11 August, we heard that the Government had changed their position; someone briefed *The Times* on behalf of the holidaying Secretary of State, and said:

"It's a one-off and not for those who have decided to go off back-packing. It should not be presented as a U-turn."

The aide, who no doubt thought that he was being helpful, was of course talking about the proposal to allow students to start a course in 1998 provided that they had signed up to a course of charitable work in the gap year.

It is just as well that that first concession was not presented as a U-turn, because the true U-turn came three days later, when the Government announced that the fears were not all scaremongering hype, and that the gap year arrangement would be open not only to those who had signed up for charitable work but to all 19,000 students who were expecting to start their courses in autumn 1998.

Within three weeks of the Secretary of State announcing his gap year policy, there have been three different versions. That was the first example of the noble Baroness's deft political touch.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Does my right hon. Friend agree that confusion was left trailing in the wake of the various U-turns, in that there were further anomalies, as with my constituent who intended to have a gap year but waited until her A-level results had confirmed her university place, and found that she was excluded arbitrarily from the Government's concession?

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We might expect a fourth concession, although I would not hold out much hope for his constituent. That is an example of what happens when a Government introduce a policy within hours of a report's publication, without having thought through the details.

There are other details that Labour has not thought through. I hope that the Secretary of State will make it clear to the House whether he agrees with Baroness Blackstone or with the Prime Minister about college fees for Oxford and Cambridge. The noble Baroness has made no secret of her view that the Oxbridge college fees system is an anomaly.

An unnamed Minister, whose views were an uncannily accurate reflection of those of the noble Baroness, was quoted in the *Financial Times* on 23 October. The Minister said:

"with the entire sector facing a squeeze, it's becoming increasingly difficult to defend a system which gives extra money to the rich".

On 24 October, the *Financial Times* had the headline, "Blair steps into Oxbridge Funding Row". This is a Government who make policy by press leaks to the *Financial Times*; it is a facility they have used more than once in recent weeks.

Is the Secretary of State lining up with his noble Friend the Minister of State, or is he lining up with the Prime Minister, who has made it clear that he has no truck with the ending of Oxford and Cambridge college fees? Will the Secretary of State tell us what is going on with the policy on Oxford and Cambridge college fees? Will he tell us who makes policy on the issue? Is it the Secretary of State, Baroness Blackstone or the Prime Minister? If he does not intend to make an announcement this afternoon, will he tell us when the announcement will be made? Perhaps he will tell us which copy of the *Financial Times* we should buy to find the authoritative statement of the Government's policy.

We now come to the reason for the presence of the Scottish Minister for Education and Industry on the Government Front Bench this afternoon. The shambles over gap year students and the shambles over Oxford and Cambridge college fees are as nothing compared with the shambles the Government have got themselves into on English students, Welsh students and Northern Irish students attending Scottish universities. Let us be clear about the issue.

Some 27,000 students in Scottish universities today come from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Some 48 per cent. of the student population in Edinburgh, 45 per cent. of the student population at St. Andrews, 36 per cent. in Dundee and 32 per cent. in Stirling are non-Scottish UK students who will now be asked to pay £4,000 of fees for a four-year course that costs the Scottish students studying alongside them in the same seminars £3,000.

The Secretary of State is a member of a United Kingdom Cabinet. He must explain to the United Kingdom Parliament why the same course, supported by the same taxpayers, should cost his constituents £4,000 in fees, but should cost the constituents of the Scottish Minister for Education and Industry £3,000 in course fees. The Secretary of State must answer that question. Why is the deal that is good enough for the Scottish Minister's constituents not good enough for the constituents of the Secretary of State and of every Member of this House of the United Kingdom Parliament who represents a constituency in England, in Wales, or in Northern Ireland?

When the Secretary of State has explained that point, he may then like to move on to the second question. Why will Scottish bankers and lawyers get their four-year courses for £3,000 of fees, whereas Scottish doctors and dentists will have to pay £4,000 of fees? The position is not entirely clear to the British Medical Association, but it seems clear enough from the press release issued by the Scottish Minister for Education and Industry that Scottish doctors and dentists will pay £4,000 for their course, whereas Scottish bankers and lawyers, who are not noticeably less well paid than Scottish doctors and dentists, will pay £3,000 for their course. I look forward to hearing the explanation of United Kingdom policy from a United Kingdom Minister to the United Kingdom Parliament.

I have a third question—

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Dorrell: I have a third question for the Secretary of State, after which I will give way to my hon. Friend.

When the Secretary of State has finished giving the answers to my first two questions, he may then explain why the course that costs the Scottish student £3,000 and the student from England, Wales or Northern Ireland £4,000 is available to the citizens of southern Ireland and every other European Union country for £3,000. That is the pièce de résistance. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Perhaps the Secretary of State can say the same phrase in Spanish, in Portuguese or in Greek to demonstrate how truly communautaire he is being.

It is an odd policy that requires English students, Welsh students and Northern Irish students to pay £4,000 in fees at Scottish universities for a four-year course when students from every other country in the European Union get the same service for £3,000. I look forward to hearing the Secretary of State explain the objective of this aspect of United Kingdom Government policy.

Mr. Swayne: Is my right hon. Friend aware that, when the Secretary of State for Scotland was asked precisely that question not half an hour ago, he replied that he would not have to explain it to Germans or Greeks, because they understood the obligations of the European Union? Perhaps the Secretary of State for Education and Employment could explain to students from Ringwood, Lymington and New Milton why they will be charged an extra £1,000 that will not be charged to Greeks or Germans.

Mr. Dorrell: My hon. Friend puts his point vigorously, and he is entirely right. It is the same question. If it is good enough for the constituents of some Member of Parliament from southern Portugal, why is it not good enough for the constituents of my hon. Friend in Ringwood?

The effect of the Government's policy on Scottish universities is already clear. The Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals has warned:

"faced with the prospect of paying 33 per cent. more in fees in Scotland, English and other UK students will simply stay away."

That is not only the view of higher education principals but the experience of the dean of admissions of St. Andrews university, who said:

"We have been getting a steady flow of cancellations in the last few weeks and the number is growing. Since the start of the week, we have been getting calls from English students to tell us that they aren't even going to bother coming to see us."

That is what is happening in the Scottish university system because of the Government's policy. I look forward to hearing why they think that it is the right policy.

The problem of declining admissions is not confined to Scotland. We have already seen Universities and Colleges Admissions Service figures showing early applications to universities throughout the United Kingdom down by 12 per cent. That reduction in early applications to British universities as a whole reflects the uncertainty and malaise that has settled over higher education policy since the Secretary of State came to the House in July.

The Dearing report was a major missed opportunity. It was a chance to address the issues facing the higher education system in a serious way. The Opposition agree that we need continued growth in the higher education system, and that we need a more flexible system that responds to the different demands of students; a system in which students fairly contribute an element of the cost of growth; and a system that is fair to students from low-income backgrounds. In his anxiety to rush out his response, the Secretary of State has bungled those issues, and bungled them badly. He should have offered a considered response; he has wholly failed to do so.

4.22 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"welcomes the decisive response of Her Majesty's Government to the report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education and to the crisis of funding in higher education bequeathed by the previous administration; notes with approval the new arrangements for supporting students, including fair repayment arrangements and targeted help for the most disadvantaged; and welcomes the commitment to ensuring that more people will have opportunities to participate in high-quality education to their benefit and to the benefit of the country as a whole."

The shadow Secretary of State has the barefaced cheek to have served in a Government who cut, on average, 25 per cent. per student from university funding over the past eight years alone, who cut 40 per cent. from the funding available for maintenance for students over the past eight years alone, and who oversaw the collapse of direct funding into research, teaching, equipment and the infrastructure of our university system; and, six months after losing office, to criticise this Government for taking difficult but necessary decisions.

The previous Government at least set up the Dearing committee in the feeble recognition that there was a problem, even if they were not prepared to face up to it. We signed up to Dearing precisely because we were prepared to face up to reality. The problem is that the Opposition are suffering from two diseases: internal fission leading to impending political disintegration, and chronic amnesia, which means that they forget 18 years of what they were up to while they were the Government.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Blunkett: In a moment.

This is the new political animal that hibernates during the summer and comes out in the depths of winter, covered by darkness, blinking into the shadows, continuing in obscurity, unable to distinguish real decision taking in government from the dithering of opposition.

Mr. Bercow: I should like to test just how the Secretary of State fares on the amnesia count. Is he prepared now, on the record, to acknowledge that the expansion of higher education under the previous Conservative Government was dramatically greater than any that occurred under the Labour Administration between 1974 and 1979? Does he acknowledge that fact or does he seek to deny it?

Mr. Blunkett: The hon. Gentleman may be surprised to learn that, even before the election, I gave the previous Government credit for their one commendable action in respect of higher education—to open up access, which they subsequently sealed by introducing a cap that stopped students entering university even if they had the required standard and capacity to do so.

On the back of the hon. Gentleman's intervention, I should like to welcome the conversion of the shadow Secretary of State and his party. I was delighted to hear his announcement this afternoon that they are in favour of the continued development of the university sector. In other words, the Conservative party is now committed to expansion—first, to overturn the policy that it followed for the past four years, which put a cap on university entrance and, secondly, to overturn the evidence that the previous Government gave to the Dearing committee to the effect that expansion should be blocked, so no extra money would be required to fund universities as the answer was retrenchment.

[Mr. Blunkett]

I am delighted to demonstrate that my amnesia is more than matched by that of the shadow Secretary of State this afternoon. Let me spell out one or two examples of what we have done. Of course we made a statement on the back of the publication of the Dearing report on 23 July, not merely because parliamentary procedure and practice demanded that we did so, but because it was necessary to ensure that students, universities and those engaged in the admissions process were aware of our policies for 1998. Had we not done so, we would have lost a whole year. Even on existing accountancy rules, we would have lost £100 million in 1999–2000, never mind the opportunities provided by the imaginative programme that I have announced for 1998–99. Let me say a word or two about that, given that I have been challenged on the so-called memorandum within my Department.

On 23 September, we announced that we would allocate £165 million to the higher education sector. We did not announce that the entire sum would simply be handed over to the universities, but we announced that £125 million—£27 million more than Dearing recommended would be required to ensure that savings of more than 1 per cent. would not be demanded—would go directly to the institutions.

The rest will be spent on carrying out the policies that I am delighted to reiterate this afternoon. They include ensuring that disabled students are no longer means-tested and will receive an additional grant for the special needs that they have in terms of equipment, reading and so on. We shall begin the process of providing equity between full-time and part-time students by ensuring that part-time students who fall out of work can apply for an additional contribution towards their fees so that they can continue their studies.

We said that we would find £10 million to provide bursaries for postgraduate teacher training and that we would double the access funds to prevent students in hardship from having to drop out of their courses. I am proud to have agreed to the doubling of access funds as that is the beginning of the process of tackling directly the inequality and injustice of the present system which, as the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) pointed out, has resulted in 77 per cent. of better-off students getting into university compared with abysmal figures in respect of those from the less well-off bracket of society.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): Will students' supplementary allowances continue to be in the form of a grant, or will they become a loan that is repayable?

Mr. Blunkett: The additional allowance that we have agreed to make in order to overcome hardship—the extra £250 a year, for which we do not appear to have gained as much credit as I had expected—will be part of the overall loan system. That loan system results in families not having to find more than they currently have to find, because the maintenance and fees elements are bolted together imaginatively to ensure that that is so. The doubling of access funds ensures that provision will be made directly available for those in greatest hardship.

When we publish our lifelong learning consultation White Paper in a few months' time, I look forward to being able to spell out in more detail our recommendations backing up the proposals of the Dearing inquiry for a radical programme of opening up access for socio-economic, geographic and cultural minority groups that have suffered from an inequitable system in the past.

Mr. Welsh: May I draw to the Minister's attention my great concern that supplementary allowances being in the form of a loan might act as a massive time bomb in the further education system? It would deter anybody with parental responsibilities—mature students, for example—from undertaking studies. That threatens great potential harm to the entire further education system, so I hope that the Minister will take those concerns on board.

Mr. Blunkett: The difficulty is that further education students are currently denied the opportunity of contingent loans, never mind grants; therefore the contribution made by 2 million adult further education students across the United Kingdom is inequitable in relation to full-time undergraduates. That is one of the issues that we seek to address. We have said that higher national diploma students currently in their courses will not be disadvantaged. In addition, a proportion of the money—£1 million from the £165 million—will be allocated next year to ensure that they are not disadvantaged.

Out of the £165 million £125 million will go directly to the institutions, with the remaining £40 million spread between investment in ensuring greater equity of access, overcoming anomalies, ensuring that disabled students receive grants and not loans to cover their special needs and are not means-tested, and ensuring that part-time students are treated equitably. That is a major package, which I would have expected the shadow Secretary of State to welcome—especially because, on 23 July, he suggested that there would be no new money for universities. He said:

"simply another vague promise that will be delivered some time or never".—[*Official Report*, 23 July 1997; Vol. 298, c. 952.]

The "some time" took us two months from 23 July—two months to deliver £165 million, which the university sector as a whole has welcomed. Let me make it clear that the resources we are identifying will be delivered for lifelong learning for all those who can take advantage of it in further as well as higher education, so that we can bring about equity, invest in our future and take on the challenge of a knowledge-based society for a new century.

I should also put straight the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce). He might have been able to get the figures for income-contingent repayment on the internet only from 3 October, but I published them—as I did the £165 million package—on 23 September. In fact, I referred to those figures in my speech to the Labour party conference in Brighton on 1 October, in which I spelt out that a student on £17,000 would be repaying only £12 a week, compared with £129 a month under the current loans system. How I could refer to those figures on 1 October when I did not publish them until three days later I do not know. This is just cloud cuckoo land. The so-called confusion or lack of information comes from people taking extraordinarily long holidays and being unable to catch up with the newspapers until it is too late.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman if the information was available. However, under his proposals, a student studying for four years in London will, at today's prices, take out a loan in excess of

£16,000. If that student marries another student, the couple will start their married life with a debt of £32,000. If they are on average earnings, how long will it take them to pay back the loan? Is not such an appalling debt the reason why nobody is coming forward to become a student teacher?

Mr. Blunkett: The previous Government introduced a mortgage-type loan scheme that demanded draconian repayments of up to £129 a month over five years as soon as the trigger came. We propose an income-contingent loan scheme, repayable over a lengthy period of up to 23 to 25 years, according to an individual's income. It is a progressive principle, espoused by all those—including my colleagues—who believe in the progressive principle of income tax. In that way, students will receive resources when they need them without an up-front top-up fee payment, and will pay back when they can afford it. I am happy to produce other figures and put them on the internet so that everyone can share them.

Mr. Bruce: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way again, but he appears to miss the essential point: the debt will be at least doubled under his proposal.

Mr. Blunkett: This may have arisen from a misunderstanding by the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment. The figures do not involve a doubling. Students in London must already pay back an increased loan. That was part of the previous Government's grant reductions, which is why I find the shadow Secretary of State's eulogy in respect of grants a bit difficult to take. The previous Government eroded grants year after year: 10 per cent. followed by 10 per cent. followed by 10 per cent.—a 40 per cent. real-terms cut in the amount available in grant. It has been instructive this afternoon to see the shadow Secretary of State say that he whole-heartedly agrees with a non-means-tested £1,000 contribution to fees.

I wish to explain clearly what we have done. We have Dearing-plus. We have Dearing plus our manifesto, which spelt out clearly what we would do in terms of income-contingent repayment for maintenance, but we have changed the Dearing recommendation by exempting those who are worse off from having to pay the fee. We have ameliorated the system for those in the middle-income bracket and we are asking the better-off to pay the £1,000, which they will repay over a period, based on their ability to pay.

Mr. Willis *rose—*

Mr. Blunkett: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), whom I had the pleasure to hear on my local radio station demonstrating in my great city on Saturday.

Mr. Willis: It was a pleasure to entertain you, Secretary of State. One of the real issues, to which you started to allude, is that of getting resources into our universities. You made the point about—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order.

Mr. Willis: I am sorry. The Secretary of State made the point about—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Gentleman is now correcting himself.

Mr. Willis: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Secretary of State said that £165 million extra will go in next year. He has made it clear that his policy is Dearing-plus. The Dearing report made it clear that we needed £350 million next year and £575 million the year after to save our universities from collapse. Would the Secretary of State be kind enough to square those two issues, because I do not understand how £165 million bridges the gap which Dearing said desperately needed to be bridged?

Mr. Blunkett: I have not pretended for a minute that we have found for the coming year the amount of money that Sir Ron Dearing had in his checklist. I do not duck that issue at all. We have identified resources from our own Budget, in imaginative ways that previously were not available, which fall within the Government's overall control totals, and which allows us to get the programme into being from September 1998, and immediately to trigger in from 1999 onwards the savings—and therefore the income—which otherwise would not be available.

If we were not doing that, we would lose £100 million in 1999, increasing to £800 million in 2005–06, even under present accountancy procedures. If we moved to resource accounting, the sums would come much earlier, in terms of just over £1,000 million by 2002–03. This is the programme for raising the resources to lift the cap, to open up access, to target under-represented groups, to give opportunity to those who are denied it and to invest in lifelong learning and the knowledge-based society of the future.

I was grateful to the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) for drawing attention to the interesting division that exists between Conservative Members in their policy on this issue. We have a policy from the shadow Secretary of State, we have a policy from the candidate in the Winchester by-election, and we have a policy from those hon. Members who should know better, who have experience in these areas, such as the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson). Responding to my statement of 23 July, he said:

"I congratulate the Government on the statement . . . the Government have taken a courageous decision, which should be supported by everyone who has universities' interests at heart."

He was an ex-Education Minister, so he would at least have some idea.

Even the forthright right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the immediate ex-Minister in the Department, said:

"I welcome the general thrust of the Dearing report and much of what the Secretary of State said".

What about the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor)? He said:

"The Secretary of State is to be congratulated on grasping some of"

Dearing's

"radical aspects, including the deferred contribution of students to tuition fees."—[*Official Report*, 23 July 1997; Vol. 298, c. 955-61.]

I know that there are several Conservative parties on the issue of monetary union and Europe in general. I had not realised, however, that there are three, not two, Opposition parties on the issue of student maintenance and student fees. I do not know what the policy of the former hon. Member for Winchester, Mr. Malone, would be if he were elected for Winchester. I do not know whether he would have a free vote on that issue,

[Mr. Blunkett]

or whether, if he were co-opted to the shadow Cabinet immediately, it would be demanded of him that he change his mind only when the Leader of the Opposition changes his mind, and never if the ex-Chancellor and ex-Deputy Prime Minister lead him astray. I do know that the shadow Cabinet will remain a shadow for a very long time to come, because it is in a shambles.

Dr. Lynne Jones: It would be interesting to know whether Conservative Members accept Dearing's recommendation on the move to resource accounting. In that regard, I wish my right hon. Friend good luck in his negotiations with the Treasury because, as he admitted, beyond 1998–99, unless there is a change of that nature, we shall have difficulty in giving the extra resources to universities, the £165 million that Dearing recommended—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the House that speeches have been limited today to 10 minutes for Back Benchers because time is very limited. That means that all interventions should be extremely brief.

Dr. Jones: May I briefly ask my right hon. Friend what his projections are for 1999–2000? As he is aware, the extra £165 million was obtained by rephasing student loans.

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her good wishes and support in this matter. I have indicated that the immediate yield from the new proposals would have been £50 million in 1999–2000 from Dearing and £100 million under our proposals. We are discussing with colleagues in the Treasury a plan to enable us to ensure that the universities are not disadvantaged and that—as I am sure that hon. Members would want—further education is supported and enhanced as well. It is very important that, in the wider debate, we see higher education in terms of lifelong learning, which has been grossly neglected.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, before he ends his speech, or my hon. Friend the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, give us the latest position on the financing of the four-year Scottish honours course, which greatly bothers Stuart Sutherland, the vice-chancellor of Edinburgh university, and many others in Scottish education?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend the Minister for Education and Industry, in winding up this afternoon's debate, will respond directly on issues relating to the decisions taken by the Scottish Office, but—

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): *rose—*

Mr. Dorrell *rose—*

Mr. Blunkett: I shall finish my sentence and then give way to the shadow Secretary of State. We are talking about the 25 per cent. of students who would have had to pay the full premium, because others would have had it ameliorated or alleviated anyway; and we are talking about a situation in which A-level students from England or Wales, not wholly but substantially, find themselves able to enter the second year of university courses in Scotland.

Mr. Dorrell: First, can the Secretary of State confirm that the number of students going from England to Scottish universities and claiming exemption from the first year of a four-year course on the ground of their A-levels is 10 per cent. of all the English students entering Scottish universities? Secondly, does he accept that it is not good enough to say that his hon. Friend the Scottish Office Minister will deal with the matter when he winds up? The Secretary of State is the United Kingdom Education and Employment Minister. We are talking about students who live in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and it is for the Secretary of State to explain why, on behalf of his right hon. and hon. Friends, he supports a policy that discriminates against his constituents.

Mr. Blunkett: I can now see why the right hon. Gentleman got himself into such a tangle when he went to Scotland before the general election, to talk about constitutional issues. The Scottish Office is responsible for the university sector in Scotland; that is the historic difference in terms of responsibilities for education in our country. That was before the referendum, of course; it has nothing to do with proposals for further decentralisation and devolution, welcome although they are. That is why I referred to my hon. Friend the Scottish Office Minister responding at the end of the debate.

However, I have explained the position. Many more students than those who currently take up the option of entering in the second year could, would be able to and I hope will, take advantage of that option, given that highers—I realise that they have now changed to "higher stills"—and A-levels were and are different. This afternoon we are discussing a package of measures addressing equity, access, the unfairness that has existed and investment in the future of our higher education and lifelong learning system.

Mr. Wallace: Although the Minister for Education and Industry is responsible for Scottish universities, the Secretary of State is ultimately responsible to local authorities for student awards and student payments made by students in England and Wales who attend Scottish universities. The Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals is expressing considerable concern that the change might frighten away a number of students from England and Wales, to the extent that it says that it could threaten the survival of courses, departments and even, in the long run, whole institutions. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that that matter should be looked at again in terms of English, Welsh and Northern Ireland students attending Scottish universities?

Mr. Blunkett: I shall address myself entirely to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question. He asks whether there is fear, and there is. I want to confront that fear head on. Fear is generated by misunderstanding about what the Government will introduce. There is fear among those who believe that they will have to pay top-up fees, when we have explicitly ruled them out. There is fear among people who believe that they will have to find the money immediately rather than paying it back over a

lengthy period according to their incomes. Many fears have been whipped up. Even those who have the best intentions in seeking to oppose our proposals are contributing to the danger that young and mature students who were contemplating attending university next year may now not do so.

I have written letters to all students in colleges, in further education, sixth forms and tertiary colleges—which will be delivered in the next few days—advising them of the Government's true proposals and asking them to take up places as they had intended. We ask those students to acquire the resources that will enable them—through the higher average earnings that higher education leavers achieve—to pay a contribution that will enable a future generation to enjoy the benefits and the privileges of higher education. What they have now, others will have in the future.

We seek to open access to new groups that have been denied it by targeting particular socio-economic, cultural and geographic groups. We appeal to people to take up the challenge to invest in their future and to ensure that both they and the nation gain in the approaching new century.

4.51 pm

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): There is clearly much disagreement in the Chamber about the Government's proposals for the future funding of higher education. However, it is important to place on record the fact that there is also much agreement.

I hope that all hon. Members welcome the Secretary of State's announcement of an additional £165 million for education and the uses to which that money will be put. I hope that all parties agree that there is a significant measure of support for many of the proposals in the Dearing report, and we should be pleased that the Government have accepted them. We should also support the Government's proposals to introduce a new, fairer income-contingent loan scheme. Perhaps most important, I hope that all hon. Members welcome the expansion of higher education in recent years, from an elitist system for 5 per cent. to a mass 30 per cent system. We must surely welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to lift the cap and increase the number of students in both further and higher education.

I hope that we might also agree that the expansion of further and higher education was seriously underfunded by the previous Government. The Secretary of State has already referred to some relevant figures. For example, four fifths of our universities have obsolete or inadequate teaching equipment, and one in six students drop out, many because of problems associated with poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) referred to Sir Ron Dearing's finding that universities will need £350 million next year and £565 million the year after merely to stand still. I hope that we also agree that there is an urgent need to widen access to universities and to attract more people from under-represented groups—particularly those from less well-off backgrounds and from certain ethnic minority groups.

If we agree on all of those points, we can surely agree that the tests of whether the Government's proposals—or any other proposals—are right are: will they truly widen access; will they provide much needed urgent funds to our universities in order to meet the current crisis; and will they avoid creating additional problems and inequalities in the system? Sadly, I believe that, in relation to the Secretary of State's proposals, the answer to all three questions is no.

First, as to whether the proposals will widen access, I understand the Government's argument that those from lower socio-economic groups and certain ethnic minority backgrounds are particularly averse to debt. Therefore, while introducing fees, the Government propose to means-test parents and offer lower fees and greater maintenance loans to the less well-off. I understand the reasons for it, but I believe that the Government's approach is fundamentally wrong.

Means testing is socially regressive. The Liberal Democrats believe that, from the age of 18, everyone should be treated as an independent adult. After all, at 18, people are old enough to vote, marry, drive and even to die for their country. However, when it comes to being assessed for paying for their university education, people are treated like little children. It is the students, not the parents, who benefit directly from higher education. Therefore, the students should contribute to their education from future earnings rather than from the family's current earnings. Means testing is good for the factory worker's son, who pays no fees, gets a higher maintenance loan and goes on to a highly paid job in the City. However, it is not so good for the managing director's daughter who becomes a social worker. The system is simply not fair.

More important, I believe that means testing is wrong because it misunderstands the nature of under-representation in higher education. Those from less well-off backgrounds tend not to attend university simply because they do not stay on in education after age 16. Therefore, the key to widening access to higher education is not means-tested fees, but boosting the staying-on rate post-16.

Dr. Lynne Jones: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, and I have some sympathy with it. The fact is that, according to Barclays' student survey, on average, parents give £631 to their children at university in excess of the parental contribution. It is clear that students from poor families are not receiving that money, so those from affluent backgrounds are receiving far more than £631. The reality is that rich families will not allow their children to start off life in debt, but poor families have no choice.

Mr. Foster: I have some sympathy with the hon. Lady's view. I do not think that anyone can remove all the inequalities in society. It is a great pity that the hon. Lady makes that point yet supports a Government who are not prepared to change income tax regulations. We proposed helping to remove inequality by increasing the upper rate of income tax in order to support those who are less well off. I am delighted to see that the hon. Lady supports that move, even if her colleagues do not.

[Mr. Foster]

The second test is: will the proposals provide extra funds to meet the current crisis in education? The answer is again no. The current loans system will not begin to make savings until 2015. However, the admittedly better income-contingent scheme proposed by the Secretary of State will not make a cumulative saving to the Treasury until 2092. Worse still—I do not think that this point has been picked up elsewhere—the new scheme may increase public spending because students will need to borrow more and a better repayment system will encourage them to do so.

At present, 63 per cent. of students take up the option of a student loan. If that figure increases to 90 per cent., for example, lending will increase by £375 million. Furthermore, if 100,000 of the Prime Minister's additional 500,000 students go into higher education, that 10 per cent. increase in students will require a 10 per cent. increase in funding for our universities, which will amount to another £700 million. We do not know where that money will come from, and the Government's proposals do nothing to solve the immediate crisis.

My third question is: will the proposals avoid other problems and inequalities? Sadly, the answer is again no. As the shadow Secretary of State pointed out, we have witnessed the chaos regarding the gap year students, where there were all the signs of the Government's hastily cobbling together a set of proposals. I warn the Secretary of State—I am delighted to see that the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), is by his side—that the problem in relation to gap year students continues. Even in the Government's latest publication, the Secretary of State says that he will write to all students about his proposals. I hope that when he does so, he will put right an error in his own document. The latest document states:

"'Gap year' students starting in the 1998/99 academic year whose places have been confirmed by 1 August 1997 will be treated as other students starting in the 1997/98 academic year."

The Secretary of State surely recalls, however, that the A-level results were not even out by 1 August, so not a single place could have been confirmed. The Secretary of State looks puzzled. Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State will pass him a copy of the letter that he has been sending to many worried parents about that, in which the Under-Secretary puts right the omission in the Secretary of State's document.

Other problems that have arisen show that Ministers are creating policy on the hoof—for example, the recent decision on the discounted fee rate for trainee teachers, and the different discounted rate for trainee doctors and dentists. Perhaps the best example of all is the one raised by the shadow Secretary of State concerning the Scottish students, although I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that his defence of the European Union during his remarks on that may well oblige him to consider leaving the shadow Cabinet.

As the shadow Secretary of State rightly pointed out, Scottish students in Scottish universities get their fourth year free, as do students from other EU countries, but not students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Presumably they have opted out of the EU. The position was beautifully summed up by one Scottish principal, who said that an Umbrian from Italy would pay £1,000 less than a Northumbrian from England. That is the real confusion.

The problems are not over, and the Secretary of State will have to address them. On the question of up-front fees with no loan, what happens when parents fail to make up the contribution as, sadly, many do? Will there be court cases like the one currently going on in Scotland, in which a student is suing his mother? While they wait for the court judgment, will students be out on their ear? Will our universities have to set up huge debt collection departments?

Mr. Blunkett: I am intervening so that we do not start with the hares running. The balance that we have achieved between the maintenance and the fee structure is such that people are not being asked to contribute more as a result of the means testing of the family than they do at present. I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would concede that that is the case, and that therefore we are not imposing some additional, theoretical burden that makes it more difficult for families to contribute than it is at present.

Mr. Foster: I concede that point to the Secretary of State, but the mechanism for the collection of the money is now quite different. There is an additional layer of bureaucracy, with the student being responsible for making that payment, in addition to the local education authority fee contribution. That increase in bureaucracy concerns me.

Perhaps the Secretary of State will intervene and clarify another matter relating to the EU regulations. As he knows, we must treat all our EU partners the same. That means, presumably, that we must have a mechanism for checking on parental incomes for means-testing purposes—for example, the income of the doctor in Dortmund or the fishmonger in Frankfurt. Can the Secretary of State tell the House how he intends that to take place?

Mr. Blunkett: No, I am not answering questions.

Mr. Foster: The Government's plan seemed to be that they would hit the ground running, but if they want to do that, they should plan the route first.

The proposals for means-tested tuition fees fail all the tests, and they are profoundly wrong in principle. My party believes that education should be free and available to all. The Secretary of State knows that many in his party and in the Trades Union Congress agree with me. The Secretary of State rightly picked up my comments about Mr. Gerry Malone in Winchester, then cited various other Tory Members who disagreed with Tory policy, but he should not forget that there is equal division within the ranks of the Labour party.

At the recent Labour party conference, several constituency Labour parties tabled motions against tuition fees. Many Labour Members know that fees are wrong. Some spoke out at the rallies on Saturday. Some have signed early-day motion 361 calling on the Government to abandon their proposals. The recent Harris opinion poll discovered that 45 per cent. of Labour Members opposed fees, 12 per cent. did not know and only 34 per cent. were in favour of the Government's proposals.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): Is the hon. Gentleman contradicting what he said in 1995 in a Liberal

consultation paper on higher education, and later in 1996 in *Liberal Democrat News* where he stated:

"Leaving aside the extra resources that we want to spend on other areas of education. . . such an approach"—

which is an approach not means-tested—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that the hon. Lady is one of those who is seeking to speak later. This is not helping the debate along. Will she bring her intervention quickly to a close?

Ms Hodge: I have been told to ask the hon. Gentleman: is he not a hypocrite?

Mr. Foster: It is frightening how the Labour party has to operate. It asks various hon. Members to ask questions, but does not give them a proper briefing. If the hon. Lady had done her homework, she would know that 18 months ago the Liberal Democrat party changed its policy position. We did it openly and honestly, in a public debate within our party. We made it clear in the resolution that we passed at that time, which I will quote to the hon. Lady, that we would

"provide state funding for tuition fees for all courses up to and including first degree level, including"—

as, sadly, her party will not do—

"part-time courses."

I am not a hypocrite. I am someone who is willing to change his mind when he discovers that he has got it wrong.

Of course the Liberal Democrats believe that our universities need extra funding. There are three beneficiaries—the state, employers and the student. We believe that all three could pay a little more. Students should pay more, through the remaining maintenance grants being turned into loans, as the Government propose, but not through fees. Employers could pay a little more into the system, and the state could do so too, out of general taxation.

Our proposals for a three-way funding partnership have widespread support. They would help to widen access, provide much needed money immediately and avoid the numerous problems that the Government are creating. They would also end the divide between part-time and full-time students.

There is another way in which additional funds for our universities could be found—by changing the current inappropriate accounting rules for student loans, which treat lending as spending. If we can instead treat the element of student loans that will be repaid, less administration and subsidy costs, as an investment in the creation of human capital, we could put that money on to the public sector borrowing requirement and reduce the money in the departmental control total, thereby freeing money to be spent on education.

I know that the Secretary of State has been pressing hard for that change. We give him every support to achieve that. We applaud him for the work that he is doing, but I cannot applaud his stance on means-tested tuition fees. They are a charge too far. They are a student poll tax, and we oppose them.

5.8 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I am pleased that the Opposition have given us the opportunity to debate such a vital issue. It is sad that more Opposition Members could not be with us.

The funding of higher education is important not just to individuals, but to our community. It determines our economic health and our cultural wealth. We ask higher education institutions to do two things: to provide us with intelligent and adaptable men and women, who can solve the country's problems and modernise our industries, and to ensure that they have a broad educational experience which promotes personal development.

If our universities are to do that effectively, they must draw from the widest possible pool of talent. Sadly, that is not always the case. Too many of our students leave education far too early. The result is not only a tragedy for those involved, whose opportunities and life chances are restricted as a result; it represents an economic disaster for the country. Any proposals for student finance must be judged in that context, and those making those proposals must answer two vital questions: do they improve access to higher education and do they safeguard standards? Neither the system that the Opposition put in place nor the Dearing proposals alone satisfy those tests.

It is longer than I care to remember since I first went to university. When I did, none of my neighbours knew or understood where I was going or what I could expect there. It is shameful that the same would be true today. Despite the increase in student numbers which the Opposition have rightly mentioned, it is true that throughout the 1990s the increase among socio-economic classes A to C was more than double that among classes D and E, whose members are in any event less likely to participate.

Anyone who doubts the result of that statistic should speak, as I did recently, to a headmaster in my constituency who was trying to persuade one of his talented pupils, who was destined to get good examination results, to go to university. Her aim in life was to get a job in an office. Research tells us that that pattern is repeated throughout the country. The major disincentive to students staying on in higher education is the desire to go out and earn money.

The system that the Conservative party promoted when it was in government makes the position worse because it forces many students to be reliant on their parents not just while in education but afterwards. Students must pay back their loans over five years at a time when graduate incomes are at their lowest. Implementation of the Dearing report would not improve that situation because it would require repayments to be made when an income reached £5,000. It would also require all students, including the very poorest, to pay tuition fees. Students from lower-income families would thus be faced with a major disincentive.

Parents cannot subsidise students from such families when they graduate. There is no money in the bank from which they can draw. Graduates from these families must earn their own keep, and under that system many people are concerned about how they would keep, feed and clothe themselves. No wonder that many such students choose to leave when they are 18.

We not only fail to attract many students from low-income families into higher education. As the Dearing report makes clear, there are major concerns

[Helen Jones]

about standards throughout the country. The report refers to evidence of inconsistencies among external examiners. As a result, there is a reference to quality assurance agencies to maintain standards in our higher education institutions.

Anyone who has been in higher education recently cannot be surprised by what I have said. I returned as a mature student and I saw students who missed meals because they could not afford to eat properly. I saw students who could not keep up with their courses because they were working in the evenings. I saw libraries that were not properly equipped, with not enough books and, in one case, not even enough chairs. I saw overcrowded classrooms and out-of-date equipment. These are direct results of the Conservative party's cutting student funding by up to 25 per cent. per student. If we continue on the course that the Conservative party is proposing, in 20 years' time we shall face a shortfall of £2 billion.

How would the Conservatives square the circle? There are only two options open to them. Either they would have to increase taxes by as much as 3p in the pound or they would have to restrict student access. We do not need a crystal ball but merely to reflect on their past record to know which option they would prefer. That is why the motion represents crocodile tears from those who in the past have displayed crocodile teeth.

We shall put in place a system that protects the poorest students so that they do not have to pay tuition fees. We shall ensure that repayments are contingent on incomes. We shall ensure also that no parent has to pay more than he or she is paying now. The Opposition's proposals would not tackle student poverty, would not ensure security of funding and would not ensure a quality of education. Their proposals are a recipe for catastrophe. They would do nothing to improve access and nothing to help poor students. If we accept the motion we shall be failing the present generation of students and future generations. The motion offers a dead-end route, and I urge the House to reject it.

5.14 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The Secretary of State referred to my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson), who described the right hon. Gentleman's decision as "courageous". That called to mind the excellent comedy programme "Yes, Minister". My recollection is that when Sir Humphrey used "courageous" in relation to his Minister's decision, he meant something quite different. Perhaps the Secretary of State should take that as a warning rather than a sign of encouragement.

I have nothing against the principle that students, when graduates, should pay something towards the costs of their education. The hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) talked about hypocrisy, but I would not want to use such a word. I remember clearly the strong opposition from the Labour party when the then Conservative Government introduced a modest system of top-up loans for students. Against that background, and given their record in office in the National Union of Students, when some were key figures in the opposition to the introduction of modest student loans by the Conservative Government, I find it remarkable that some Labour Members, who are not now in their places, are able to support the Government.

As I have said, I have nothing against the principle of students contributing something towards the costs of their education and, therefore, the introduction of some form of tuition fees. There is, however, an important distinction to be made, and that is that a tuition fee must relate to the education of the student. It must relate directly to what the undergraduate is receiving in terms of his or her higher education.

It is particularly disturbing—I know that this is the view of the university sector—that the Government have flatly refused to guarantee that the funding that is derived from the introduction of tuition fees will go to the institutions that are involved, to the universities at which individual students are studying. That raises serious questions about the Government's intentions. The higher education sector is rightly worried about that.

If the fee relates to the course and to the institution that the student is attending, what is the position of the Scottish universities? I believe that their circumstances and those of English students studying at them make clear the truth of the Government's policy, which is to introduce not tuition fees but a form of taxation that will be used merely to expand Government revenue. It will not be used necessarily to improve or fund the higher education sector.

That is wrong in equity and indefensible when put before those of our constituents contemplating going up to university, who may find themselves contributing £1,000 a year or, in the case of an English constituent going to a Scottish university, £4,000 over a four-year period. That is proposed on the pretext that they will be making a contribution to their education when in fact it will be a contribution to general Government revenue. I deprecate any such decision.

We have heard about resource accounting. There are accounting changes that can be effective, but it is clear that a political decision must be taken. Is there a political will to finance higher education or is there not? I understand that Government accounting is being debated between the Departments for Education and Employment and the Treasury. That does not remove the fact that public expenditure is public expenditure. If there is an increase in Government outgoings through the introduction of the proposed scheme, it must be accepted that that will count in terms of the public sector borrowing requirement.

The principle of fees is acceptable as long as they go towards the institutions where people are studying. What is not acceptable is where they are a feeble guise for the introduction of a tax that will impact on undergraduates and graduates. It is not acceptable if they are part of a massive, sweeping change in the overall package of student financial support. An important contrast can be drawn between the way in which the previous Administration introduced small top-up loans for students and what the current Administration are trying to do. The introduction of small top-up loans was a gradual approach.

My main concern at the effect that the Government's proposal will have on access is not necessarily the principle of what will be done, but the enormous shock effect of introducing an expensive new charge to students, through tuition fees, at the same time as abolishing the maintenance grant. There will be a massive increase in the debt that an individual contemplating going into higher

education will have to accept. The Government have to accept that, under those circumstances, many people will be deterred from entering higher education, particularly those from the lower socio-economic groups.

5.20 pm

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): I am most grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate.

Before I came to the House, I was editor of *History Today*, so I hope that the House will forgive me for having felt some small pride and privilege in making my own little piece of history on 2 May as the first-ever Labour Member of Parliament for Blackpool, South.

Blackpool and history have always been intertwined. Blackpool has played a central part in the popular culture, history and leisure of our country over the past 150 years. Blackpool's motto is "Progress". Blackpool has been a pioneering and innovatory town in municipal government for more than 150 years. It is worth remembering that its Victorian values introduced the first tuppenny tourism rate, gas and electricity on a municipal basis, the promenade and the tramways, which still work today, and, of course, the tower, with which every visitor to Blackpool is familiar.

It is a great boon to come before the House as the new Member of Parliament for Blackpool, South, because most, if not all, hon. Members will be familiar with the town through conferences. We have not one but three piers. We have a Golden Mile, where one can encounter such delights as "The World of Coronation Street" or "The Life and Times of Sooty". We have the pleasure beach, which for more than 100 years has been run by the same family and has a saga very similar to that of a Barbara Taylor Bradford novel. We have the Big One and the promise of a dark ride for the millennium, which should perhaps be referred to the Minister without Portfolio. We also have quieter pleasures in the form of Stanley park and Marton Mere, and, of course, the illuminations. We have millions of visitors. My constituency has more than 2,000 guest houses doing bed and breakfast—with a finer cooked breakfast than one will get in many of the grander hotels in North shore.

When I was a child and was taken by my parents on day trips from Manchester to Blackpool, to see such delights as Zola the Zombie—"She's alive, she's well, she's living in a goldfish bowl"—little did I think that one day I would represent that town. As I reflect on my good fortune, however, it is, of course, customary in the House to pay tribute to one's predecessor, and that I am very happy to do. My predecessor, now the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), was a chivalrous and courteous opponent when I stood against him in 1992, and the case work that I have inherited from him shows that he was assiduous and thorough, as would befit a lawyer with his training. However, I was not aware, until relatively recently, of his keen interest in eastern philosophy.

The Tory party has had a new leader since the general election, who we believe practises meditation techniques, but it is obvious that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath practised Hagueism avant la lettre. That he has returned to the House is clear evidence of that other piece of eastern philosophy, reincarnation. He has given the House proof positive of the transmigration of souls by reappearing as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath. I thank him for his contribution to bridging the north-south divide and offer him many long and happy years in his new constituency.

Blackpool is not all tourism and holidays. Many of my constituents work in industries outside the town—British Nuclear Fuels, ICI and British Aerospace, where many of them are engaged in the Eurofighter project—and in the civil service, in war pensions, disability living allowance and National Savings, Ernie and premium bonds, which has just celebrated 40 years. All those industries have faced strong challenges in recent years but have come through. At a time of discontinuity and market forces, it is as well to remind hon. Members on both sides of the House of the proud ethos of public service that Fylde civil servants have given over 50 years.

Blackpool is not all fun and candy floss. Behind the fronts of the streets, some housing conditions are positively Dickensian. Many people in Blackpool earn a poor salary. Seasonal unemployment is high—up to 20 per cent. Many of the young people who come to our town find that the streets are not paved with gold, and the problems of drug and alcohol abuse are severe. Nevertheless, I am enormously proud of the self-help, good humour, enterprise and hard work of my constituents. However, without a personal and social infrastructure to support them, their efforts to make progress and grasp opportunities will always be maimed. That is why education times three is at the heart of our project in government.

At home, I have a medal struck from the copper of Nelson's first flagship, Foudroyant, which was wrecked off Blackpool 100 years ago this year. That medal was given to my grandfather for being one of the top 10 schoolchildren in a Derbyshire elementary school, when he was 10. He wanted to be a teacher, but time, class and family circumstances meant that he spent his life as a boiler man, although I remember as a child the historical novels on his shelves, which may have stirred my interest in the subject.

A former leader of our party, when speaking about such people, said that they had been deprived of a platform, and that platform of empowerment in education is at the heart of new Labour's project. It does, of course, involve very hard choices. I must tell Conservative Members that there was never any golden age in the funding of further and higher education, and least of all under their Government.

I was the first in my family to stay on at school and go to university, and am well aware of how chance, good teachers and family encouragement helped me to come out of Oxford with a history degree. However, I am also aware that dozens of my contemporaries did not have that first, nor second, chance. The existing system of grants did nothing to support or help them. Therefore, it ill befits the Opposition to come here today to don the cloak of concern and pretend that we are in year zero.

The Opposition speak of maintenance grants, but it takes some cheek to defend a system that they progressively devalued and cut away during their period in office. In any case, it is not a system that ever benefited all students. One of the fastest-growing areas in the past few years, as Dearing has said, is that of part-time students. For them, a maintenance grant, even tutorial fee support, was never an option. I remind the House that

[Mr. Gordon Marsden]

the Conservative Government whittled away the voluntary grants that were available in their constant attack on local government funding.

As one who taught for 20 years as a part-time Open university tutor, I welcome the Government's opening moves to remedy Dearing's deficiencies in the report. I shall look to them to develop—perhaps with tax incentives—funding support to put part-time students, vocational and non-vocational, on a level playing field. The Government's response to Dearing is a responsible and realistic approach. It is one that is shared by the bodies concerned. I quote from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, which says:

"CVCP accepts that the proposed funding system is realistic and necessary to secure the future of higher education in the UK; CVCP particularly welcomes the introduction of the new income-contingent loans scheme for maintenance."

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) referred to the crocodile tears and crocodile teeth of the Opposition. I am equally not fooled by the crocodile waffle of Opposition Front Benchers, whose Government frittered years away when they had the opportunity to address the problems that the Labour Government now face. The Conservative Government were happy to see student numbers expand, but they did nothing to fund them. They did nothing in office to address the problem of pauperising students year by year.

It was not the Conservative party which created the Open university, admired worldwide as a great British contribution to education. It was not the Conservative party which came before the House with proposals for the Open college and the university of industry. It was not the Conservative party which proposed individual learning accounts which will help and enable people. It is the Labour party in government which has done and is doing those things. We do them as a debt to the dead, but we also do them as an encouragement to the living. We do them because it is part of our central project to enable, to empower, to excite and to energise all our people for the 21st century, in my constituency and throughout Britain. That is why education, education and education is central to our endeavours. That is why the Government deserve support today against the Opposition motion.

5.30 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) on his maiden speech. It was a great pleasure to listen to him. I have listened to him before today. He mentioned the towers of Blackpool and Millbank. In my memory are the towering spires of Oxford where we were together. I can tell that we shall have as many amicable differences in the future as we used to have in the past.

The issue before the House can readily be understood only if credit is given where credit is due. Of all the inheritances that the Conservative party handed on to the Government of the day on 2 May, no jewel shone brighter than that of higher education. As Professor Dearing pointed out, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development described our system of higher education as highly efficient. We may not have yet achieved the highest levels of access to tertiary education, but we have achieved one of the highest levels of degree status.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): The hon. Gentleman seems to have missed the past 20 years—the cuts in the 1980s when the Conservative Government declared that there were too many students in universities, and the expansion that was declared to be market driven, only for the Government to discover that students were not studying what they wanted them to study; so they introduced quotas, then targets, then capping, then expansion again. They destroyed the whole structure of our higher education. We would have been in a far better state if they had not been so manic in their change of policies every year.

Mr. St. Aubyn: I cannot help noticing that those Liberal Democrats who have spoken so far are passionately against the Government's proposals. It will be interesting to see whether their leader resigns from his Cabinet Committee as a result. Is this yet another example of Liberal Democrats saying one thing while they do something completely different?

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. St. Aubyn: No, I shall not give way again for a while.

In Britain, almost twice as many go through the tertiary education system as in France, Germany and Italy. Not only is our system efficient, but it delivers results. Across the G7 economies, the proportion of gross domestic product put into research and development is an average of 2.1 per cent. In Britain it is 2.2 per cent.—1.5 times the proportion in Canada, nearly twice the proportion in Italy, and nearly the same as the proportion in France, Germany, Japan and the United States. Of course we want to be at the top of the league, but we are in there and we have a highly respectable place in it.

If there is a problem in the jewel that we passed on on 2 May, it is one of success. As has been acknowledged by representatives of all the parties who have spoken today, the Conservative Government widened access. It is that increase in access which has created the immediate problem of funding, which the Dearing report puts at £350 million a year.

The student loan book is growing at the rate of nearly £1 billion a year. Had the Government simply spent a short time working out how to unlock the value in that student loan book, they could have solved the immediate funding crisis at a single stroke and avoided this rush into a hasty judgment. They could have avoided tens of thousands having to give up their gap year and many more tens of thousands having a gap this year, next year and every year. As a result of the Government's actions, people will be deterred from entering further and higher education.

Mr. Willis: The hon. Gentleman alludes to an important issue which goes back to yesterday's debate. The sale of the student loan portfolio for this year of £1.6 billion and for next year of £1.5 billion, to which the hon. Gentleman correctly referred, was the Conservative

Government's policy. This Government picked up the legislation and got it through the House because it was in the tax and spend plans.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The hon. Gentleman is completely off beam because we are talking about the growth in the loan book, not the sale of the old loan book.

The Government propose to raise the typical graduate's debt on leaving university from an average of around £5,000 to £10,000, or even, in areas such as I represent, possibly as much as £15,000. Unlike the Conservative Government's changes to the system, which were phased in over a long period, the Government propose to introduce their changes at a stroke.

It is surely a measure of the mistake that the Government are making that they have created an enormous flaw in the system. There must be such a flaw when a student leaves university with a debt of £15,000 around his shoulders and yet the value of that debt in the Government's hands, whether it is retained on their books or sold to some third party, or whether they undertake accounting tricks, is not much more than £5,000 or £5,500. That is fundamentally a flaw and a mistake in what the Government are doing.

That flaw arises because, without thinking the matter through, the Government have chosen to allow the system that they inherited, which was designed for low levels of student loan, to grow into a mammoth system which lends a great deal of money but produces very little for the Government's coffers. It is rather as if a business decided to resolve a cash flow crisis by trebling its prices while at the same time giving such generous credit terms that its cash flow worsened. How little confidence we would have in such a business and how little confidence the House should have in such a Government.

Had the Government made some modest changes to overcome the immediate funding crisis, they would have had the time that they need. The Government need time. They need time to explain to us how they will control the level of fees. Dearing is specific about that. He proposes that an independent body, involving the institutes of higher education, should be persuaded before any change in the proportion of fees was approved. The Government propose such a change by a resolution of the House in which they have a vast majority.

As we have already seen, Labour Members have proved to have no conscience, changing their minds when they hear the buzzer of the Minister without Portfolio on their little machines, and dropping their opposition to tuition fees in one fell stroke. No doubt they would drop their opposition to changes in those fees if required to do so by the Treasury. Moreover, if students are to contribute more to the cost of their education, time is needed so that they benefit more.

The other major weakness of the proposals is that future benefits, such as quality assurance, will require time. We should help rural students to get an education that will cost them a great deal more, and we should try to change attitudes among those in their ninth and 10th years at school, because that is when attitudes must be changed if we are to encourage them to gain access to the system when they leave the sixth form. All those benefits will take time to feed through. The haste in which the Government want to implement their new policy will deny us the time that is needed. It is a mistaken policy and will do great damage to the system of higher education that the Government inherited on 2 May.

5.40 pm

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): The speech that we have just heard from the hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) shows the depths to which the Conservative party has sunk since the election. The Conservative Government set up the Dearing inquiry because they had created a funding crisis in higher education. Conservative Members now want to wash their hands and walk away. It seems that they are even more shameless in opposition than they were in government, or, as with Europe, that they have abandoned pragmatic good sense for the wilder extremes of knee-jerk opposition.

Let us consider the facts. It was the Conservative Government, not the new Labour Government, who left universities expecting a £3 billion hole in their funding by 2000. It was under the Conservative Government that vice-chancellors saw their per capita funding cut by a quarter since 1989. The new Government inherited a situation in which the universities are short of money and academic standards are threatened, in which students are poverty-stricken and ever more are dropping out, and in which expansion has been halted just when consensus had developed around the importance of education and training.

The current student finance arrangements are a mess, and everybody knows it. They have evolved through piecemeal change and through compromises with vested interests. The idea that there ever was a golden age of free higher education for all is a sham. Nothing has ever been done to help either part-time or mature students, whose numbers have tripled since 1980, who often come from the lowest-income households and for whom we want to improve access. They have always contributed to their higher education.

The Conservative Government expanded student numbers, but they failed to put in place either the funding or the necessary student finance arrangements. They tried to build a higher education system for the next century without pausing to lay the foundations. Their student loans system has been dogged by problems. Repayments are not related to income, so they hit poor graduates hardest.

When the facade began to disintegrate, what did the Conservative Government do? They froze expansion and ducked the difficult questions. They passed the buck to Dearing before the election, and have now disowned his recommendations.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Hodge: No, I will not, because of the shortage of time.

I cannot believe that the public will be fooled by the Conservative party's unprincipled scrabbling for votes. Labour Members are prepared to face the hard facts. In the long run, the taxpayer cannot meet the spiralling costs of a mass higher education system. We are spending more than £6 billion a year on higher education, yet it is not enough. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on finding an extra £165 million this year. It is

[Ms Hodge]

much needed, and the previous regime would never even have tried to help. In the long term, a more fundamental approach is required.

The Government have had the courage to grasp the nettle. Not only are they putting into effect their manifesto pledge on student maintenance, but they have had the courage to implement the Dearing recommendations and introduce tuition fees. They are putting in place a sensible system for funding higher education that is sustainable in the longer term. It will allow us to expand and extend participation to reach the target set by Ron Dearing in his report. That target is affordable, and will protect the quality standards that we value in our higher education institutions.

Income-contingent loans will mean fairer repayments for graduates. Payment will be based on ability to pay. The scare stories about higher levels of debt are misleading. Pay-back will be spread over a much longer period, and graduates will repay only when they can afford to do so. No student or parent will have to face up-front costs that are higher than those under the present system. Students from low-income families will not have to pay anything towards their fees.

I believe that the Government's proposals achieve the necessary balance between finding more money for post-18 education and protecting access. Although it is right that, to improve access, those from low-income families should not have to pay tuition fees, it is also right and fair that those who benefit from a university education should contribute towards costs.

Let us consider the difference between the position of graduates and that of non-graduates. In 1996–97, unemployment among graduates stood at 4 per cent., whereas unemployment among non-graduates was 8.2 per cent. Gross weekly earnings of non-graduates were £237, whereas graduates earned about £457 a week: a massive £220 difference.

I have one question for those who support the current system, or who advocate a return to the days of full grants. Is the money really being spent where it is most needed? The answer must be no. Fewer than 10 per cent. of university students currently come from a background where parents are unskilled or partly skilled, whereas two out of three come from the top two socio-economic class backgrounds. The current system ensures free education only for those who are already achievers, the majority of whom come from better-off families. That is unfair, inefficient and indefensible.

For too long, further education has remained the poor relation in the tertiary sector. Further education is vital if we are to make a learning society a reality. Two thirds of those who continue in post-18 education do so in further education colleges. A quarter of FE students pay their own fees, and most receive no financial support from the state for maintenance. We need to strike a new balance between higher and further education: one that recognises the importance of the FE sector, and that offers FE students a fair deal.

I urge my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to consider two further issues. The first is the means by which graduate repayments are collected. One of the reasons why the current student loans system has been such a disaster is the bureaucracy involved in recouping the loans. It would be much simpler if repayments were collected through either the national insurance or the tax system. That would make it easier to track graduates, and would cut bureaucracy. It would also make the loans more secure.

Like other hon. Members who have participated in the debate, I want a change in the way in which student loans are dealt with in the public accounts. The current system treats grants and loans as the same, which is nonsense. It is true that student loans have to be funded initially by the Treasury, so they should come within the public sector borrowing requirement. But that is not straightforward Government spending. As Bill Robinson, the former Treasury official and adviser to the Treasury Select Committee and to a former Chancellor, said in evidence to the Select Committee on Education and Employment, not all lending is necessarily spending.

The Government will recoup a large percentage of this debt. Over time, only the interest subsidy and the bad debt will have to be met by the public purse. Most modelling suggests that most Government lending will be recouped. It therefore seems common sense that not all lending should be classified as spending for spending control total purposes.

That may seem an esoteric point, but it is not. If the accounts could be changed, it would allow the Government greater flexibility. It would allow them to use the money that they know that they will recoup to expand access and improve standards. I hope that my right hon. Friends will be able to examine that issue, which could do much to alleviate the short-term funding crisis facing universities.

The Government have been left to pick up the pieces that were left by the Conservative party. My right hon. Friends should be congratulated on the way in which they have responded to the Dearing report. In a few short months, they have tackled the problems that the Tories left to fester for years. The challenge for the Government was to reform the system to increase equity, provide the resources—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady's time is up.

5.50 pm

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): The hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) accused the Tories of being more shameless in opposition than in government. Her party could be accused of exactly the opposite. In carrying out Tory policies, it seems more shameless in government than it was in opposition. The main issue in this debate is quite clear: Tory hypocrisy matched by Labour hypocrisy. The losers are the students of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Tories have some cheek to raise the issue of student hardship. They know their own abysmal record. The previous Tory Government did more than any to increase the financial pressure on our student population. The reality is made clear by the constantly rising student debt—now more than £4,000 for the average student—and the tragic rise in the drop-out rate, which is up by 12 per cent. since grants were frozen and loans were introduced.

Under the Tories, students faced a constant onslaught of personal cuts, lower grants and loss of housing benefit. For many students, university today is more about survival than about study. Getting to the odd job will become more crucial than missing the odd lecture. The Tories should be ashamed of their record and their backing of a large part of the Government's policy.

The Labour Government have cheated the electorate by promising education, education, education and delivering debt, debt and more student debt. The Government have acted on the Dearing report's recommendations by introducing tuition fees, but have blatantly ignored much of the rest of the report.

Dearing proposed that an additional £350 million be spent on higher education in 1998-99, but the Government refuse to spend much more than the Tories. The overall reality of the spending figures is less money for our universities, colleges and students. Dearing proposed the continuance of maintenance grants, but the Government, in their wisdom, have chosen to abolish grants, and in so doing have erected a financial barrier to the aspirations of potential students across the country.

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): To clarify the matter, is the hon. Gentleman endorsing the Dearing recommendations on tuition fees?

Mr. Welsh: The Scottish National party rejects tuition fees and wants to return to student grants. In an independent Scotland we would maintain the Scottish tradition from which the hon. Gentleman benefited. We are opposed to student loans and tuition fees. I am ashamed that our generation, which benefited from that grant system as part of the traditional education system Scotland, is imposing massive debt on future generations of students. It is something about which both he and I should be ashamed.

Mr. Wilson: Merely on a point of clarification, I take it that, contrary to what the hon. Gentleman may have just led the House to believe, he is not endorsing Dearing on anything.

Mr. Welsh: Far from it, I was pointing to the parts of the Dearing report which the Government and the Opposition have chosen to introduce. I was also clearly and exactly pointing out to the Minister the SNP's view. In dividing the House last night, we were against not only the privatisation of student loans but student loans on principle. I recommend that the Minister returns to the traditional view of the Scottish education system from which we both benefited and which he is withdrawing from vast swathes of the Scottish population.

The Government claim that abolishing grants and introducing fees will not be a disincentive to students from low-income families entering universities, but the students and the universities know that that is not true. The prospect of a £15,000 debt will discourage many from considering higher education. Education should not be a privilege restricted to those who can afford to pay, but that is precisely what it will become if the Government go ahead with the proposals.

The Government have often promised to listen to the electorate. Although they seem happy to listen, they refuse to hear what is being said. Thousands of students in cities throughout the United Kingdom protested at the weekend against the Government's higher education policies. Are the Government willing to listen to the voice of students or will they continue to ignore them as they have ignored the Dearing report?

The gaps and failings in the Government's plans are plain. Their proposals fail to take into account the position of mature students, especially those with family responsibilities. Will the Minister give a clear and absolute guarantee that students who claim supplementary allowances will continue to receive their grants—not as loans which they will be expected to repay? The Government's response, particularly with regard to further education, could cause enormous problems to that very important sector. Further education has tended to be ignored in comments and debates, yet it is the first stepping stone for many in returning to education or moving to higher education such as university. It is very important that students are not deterred from taking advantage of that first step on the ladder.

The Government's proposals are flawed. Why do proposals for the introduction of tuition fees continue to include a means-tested contribution when the principle of the loans system is that students are responsible for the cost of their higher education? Are the Government not admitting that fees will act as a disincentive to university entry, if not for the poorest people, for those who are just above the means-tested level? The motivation for the Government's policy is not better education but their on-going mission to save money. Theirs is a short-term approach at the expense of students and against the interests of the nation. The SNP believes that higher education is an investment in the future strength and wealth of our society. It is society which will lose out in the long run through the abolition of maintenance grants and the introduction of fees.

In the face of such education cuts, we can see the Government's true priorities. Over the past few months, they have squandered £210 million on the purchase of seven Trident missiles and the test firing of two others—another broken election promise. That £210 million could have removed the threat of tuition fees from Scots students for at least the next three years, restored student grants to 1990 levels for all Scottish students over the next four years, and restored housing benefit for the next eight years. I know what my priorities are and I am sad to see what the Government's have turned out to be. Education is not the Government's priority, given that they have squandered such precious resources on the ego-boosting but ultimately empty status symbol of the Trident weapons of mass destruction.

The weakness of the Government's proposals is best highlighted by one anomaly. Scottish-domiciled students studying in Scotland will pay for only three years of their four-year degree courses, while English, Welsh and Northern Ireland students will be forced to pay for the full four years. That will act as a clear disincentive to the thousands of non-Scottish United Kingdom students who have previously chosen Scotland for their higher education and threaten the £200 million spent by that group in the Scottish economy every year.

The Government must act to sort out the mess that they have created. The cost would be a mere £3 million to £5 million. I hope that the Minister will give a clear answer before this debate finishes. The House faces a choice: we can go down the road of ever-increasing loans

[Mr. Welsh]

and higher financial barriers to student entry to higher education or we can invest in the future of our youth and our country. The SNP will give a full and detailed reply to the Dearing report. We have always said that education is a Scottish priority—a system open to all of ability irrespective of wealth or any other background factor. Ability, not the cheque book, should remain the determinant. The SNP stands by that traditional Scottish philosophy; I deeply regret that the Government do not.

5.59 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this debate, which is of great importance to my constituency. I wish to draw in particular from the circumstances of students in Northampton. My constituency contains both a higher education and a further education college. To both, issues of access and opportunity in education are especially dear.

The Opposition have made much of the recent growth in higher education, but—as often happens—it was growth without spread. It did not bring the participation in higher education by young people from low-income families that I and my hon. Friends would have liked and that would have made education one of the main ladders to personal aspiration and success. Most of the growth in student numbers has been from young people from families with higher incomes. Those from a more disadvantaged background are still held back. The figures given by the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) illustrate that clearly.

In addition, compared with many of our competitors, participation of young British people in higher education still lags behind. It is no good for the Opposition to applaud themselves on the recent expansion of higher education when their 18 years in government left behind a system with a £2 billion funding crisis and an artificial cap on its expansion and without a breakthrough in the spread of benefits that could have transformed our society and the life chances of our young people.

It is especially wrong for the Opposition to pretend to champion the cause of low-income students. As a new Member, I have noted that whenever the Opposition come to the defence of any cause it is usually because of some vested interest that has no place in a modern society. That applies especially when we are discussing the chances of children and young people. For example, the Opposition defended the assisted places scheme, which we scrapped to provide funds to reduce class sizes for all children. They opposed the windfall tax, which will fund the new deal and give young people job chances. We now see their opposition to the Government's proposals to provide the expansion that we want to see in higher education.

The Government's proposals for the funding of higher education will ensure that young people from lower-income backgrounds are given appropriate support—and much more appropriate support than the measures behind the Opposition's weasel words. The Government's proposals for students from low-income families to be exempted from tuition fees will mean that many—probably most—of the students in my constituency will pay nothing at all. It has been calculated that 30 per cent. of students nationally will make no contribution to tuition fees.

In Northamptonshire, calculations based on the parental income of students applying to the county council for mandatory grants in previous years suggest that some 44 per cent. of students would not have to pay any tuition fees under the new scheme. In my constituency, full-time gross average earnings are £16,670, from which mortgage costs are deducted before there is any liability for tuition fees. Only 10 per cent. of the work force earns more than £27,000, which is well below the limit at which parents have to pay full tuition fees. If there is one message that the Government have failed to get across, it is the extent of the support that they are providing to students from middle-income as well as lower-income homes. I hope that the Secretary of State's letter will address some of the misunderstandings on that point.

The Opposition's emphasis on maintenance grants is perhaps because of their concern about full-time students doing a first degree straight after school. Increasingly, however, students are not recent school leavers doing full-time degrees. At Nene college in my constituency, 5,000 students aged under 21 do full-time degrees, but 4,250 mature students aged over 21 are financed completely differently and rarely benefit from maintenance grants. Half of those students are part-timers who already pay an average £600 a year in tuition fees, with no form of means testing.

The Government's proposals cannot be taken in isolation. They form a package that aims to ensure that we get the expansion needed in higher education. As part of that, I hope to see Nene college achieve university status. The only qualification on which it currently falls short is its research status and it should satisfy that criterion next year. After that, it need maintain its position for only three years to become a university. The Under–Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), is to visit Nene college shortly and I trust that he will be impressed by the standard of the work that it does, including its work building links with local and business communities and extending opportunities to students from a wide range of backgrounds. All those issues feature strongly in the Dearing proposals. I hope that my hon. Friend will also ensure that the criteria for qualifying as a university are not changed before Nene college gets its chance to qualify and to make its contributions to extending the opportunities for young people to obtain university degrees.

In his opening remarks, the right hon. Member for Charnwood spoke about a shambles. The only shambles in higher education is the one of the previous Government's making. The proposals from the present Government will go a long way to resolve the problems and ensure that higher education becomes—as we all wish—an opportunity for young people to achieve all their hopes and aspirations.

6.5 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The Dearing report made a number of recommendations that cover various issues. Two key issues were the need to widen participation in and access to higher education, and funding in higher education. The Dearing report was not some fly-by-night, hastily put together report. It was the result of many months of careful research and analysis of the issues.

A carefully thought-through package of proposals was put before the Government. Sir Ron Dearing made it clear in his report, and when he came to give evidence to the Education and Employment Committee, that the proposals were a package, and that the Government should not cherry-pick from it by choosing some proposals and discarding others.

Given the careful analysis behind the Dearing report, the Government had a duty to consider carefully their response to it, especially as their response will affect the future lives of our young people.

Mr. Öpik: The hon. Lady is right to suggest that the Government should not cherry-pick from the Dearing report. Is she saying that, if she were in government, she would not cherry-pick, but would commit £350 million next year and £565 million the year after to higher education? If so, can she explain where she would find that money?

Mrs. May: The issue we are debating this evening is whether the people who are in government today are cherry-picking from the Dearing report.

We might also consider whether the Prime Minister understands his Government's response to the Dearing proposals. At Prime Minister's questions last week, in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Prime Minister stated categorically that the Government were implementing the proposals from the Dearing report. When he was challenged on that point, he said that my right hon. Friend was wrong.

My right hon. Friend was not wrong, because the Government are not implementing the Dearing proposals. They have discarded Dearing and are doing exactly what Sir Ron Dearing suggested they should not. He said they should not take the package of proposals in the Dearing report, tear it apart and put the proposals back together in their own package.

The fact that the Government came up with an instant response to the report suggests one of two things. Either the Government make policy on the hoof—and given the importance of the issue to the future of young people, that would be reprehensible—or the Government had decided beforehand that they would introduce tuition fees and abolish maintenance grants. In that case, the Prime Minister's statement during the election campaign—

"Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education"—

is another example of the Government's betrayal of the people of this country.

The Government have chosen to move away from Dearing in two particular respects. There is real concern that the Government's decision not to follow Dearing's proposal to introduce tuition fees while maintaining the maintenance grant, but rather to abolish the maintenance grant and replace it with loans will, far from widening access, narrow it.

Particular concerns have been expressed also by those who represent rural constituencies about the impact on students who traditionally have to go away from home to get higher education. It can be argued that students living in an area with a variety of higher education establishments close by could ease their financial burden by choosing to stay at home. That would be a mistake, because the process of going away from home is part of the value of higher education. That opportunity is not open to many young people from rural parts of the country.

Another issue of concern about the Dearing recommendations is funding: here again we see the Government moving away from the proposals. The Dearing report was clear that resources produced from the introduction of tuition fees should go directly into the universities and higher education, but the Government have failed to confirm that. They give the impression that some money will be taken away from higher education and will go to other forms of education or—who knows?—into the Treasury pot.

The hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) referred to a briefing produced by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, but did not refer to this comment:

"The CVCP considers it essential that contributions from students towards tuition are ploughed back into universities and lead to a direct improvement in funding for teaching."

If nothing else, the Minister should make it clear whether the Government agree with that statement. Sir Ron made the point that, if students were paying tuition fees, the money would go into the universities which would be more careful in assessing courses. This would help to raise standards, as has been said tonight. People need to know the Government's intentions, and I trust that the Minister will provide the answer.

In opening the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) referred to the absolute fiasco with regard to English students who go to Scottish universities. The Secretary of State said earlier that the reason why he chose to make a statement in response to the Dearing report was the need for clarity. We saw over the summer months an absolute fiasco concerning gap year students, and many families suffered uncertainty and worry. Students did not know what lay ahead, because the Government, frankly, failed to get their act together. Obviously, they had not realised that gap year students would be affected by the measure, which shows their incompetence.

We now have a second fiasco. English students will pay more to attend Scottish universities than Scottish, German, French or Italian students. A National Union of Students spokesman has said that this will "devastate" universities in Scotland which rely heavily on students from outside the country. St. Andrews university has said that it could have a marked effect on cross-border flow, and it may have a significant impact on the entire higher education sector, and not just on the successful importers of non-Scots university students.

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), is here to respond to the debate. I trust that he will tell us that the Government have changed their mind and that English, Welsh and Northern Irish students will benefit from the same treatment to be given to Scottish, German and Greek students.

6.12 pm

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): Thanks to the previous Government, we now have mass higher education in this country—well, that is the case for some groups. Sadly, and worryingly, that does not apply to

[Dr. Lynne Jones]

social groups IV and V, from which only 8 per cent. of young people go on to higher education. This is quite disgraceful, when one considers that that proportion is scarcely higher than the participation rate in my day, when only one in 10 went to university.

It is pleasing that the debate has concentrated on that issue, and that hon. Members realise what a waste of our national talent that represents and how we all suffer from the failure to ensure that all young people who are capable of benefiting from higher education get the opportunity to do so. That is the subject upon which I wish to concentrate, although I come to it from a slightly different perspective.

I do not want the present Government to finish with no improvement having been made to the present situation. I benefited from higher education and a full maintenance grant, and I did not have to pay any fees. I urge my colleagues to look again at what Dearing has said about access to higher education for the lower socio-economic groups.

I would like to draw the House's attention to another document, published around the same time as Dearing, by the Council for Industry and Higher Education. The report, by Hilary Metcalf, is entitled "Social Class and Higher Education: The Participation of Young People from Lower Social Classes". As one might expect, the report found that a major factor in the lower participation of people from lower-income groups arises because of their poorer educational achievements before higher education. That is an issue on which my Government are strong, and the White Paper "Excellence in Schools" has attempted to address that issue.

There are other factors which prevent young people from poorer backgrounds from going to university, and the report deals with them. Why do young people with the necessary qualifications to go to university not take up that opportunity? That is something that we should be addressing today. Sadly, the Government's proposals do not address the major recommendation in the report—that we should address the income differential between a young person going into work direct from school and a young person becoming a student.

If the Government's proposals are accepted, a young student will end up with greater debts than he or she would have done previously. It is true that the student will not have to pay a fee, but he or she will be poorer by the £2,000 that he or she will lose in maintenance grant—something that Dearing was strongly against. He saw the abolition of maintenance grants, and their replacement with loans, as a means of reducing subsidies to the poorer sectors of society and redistributing them to the better-off. In that regard, I urge my hon. Friends to look again at this report.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Does the hon. Lady agree, on the issue of class, that the attraction of higher education for young people who saw their own pals going out and earning money, while they were piling up debt, would be minimal? We must be realistic about that.

Dr. Jones: That is absolutely right. When I was a young girl living on a council estate, very few of my friends went to university, and I was constantly asked whether I did not want to go out and get a job to earn some money, which was what the others aspired to do.

The report shows that young people from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to see higher education as the route to a higher income. They will be put off higher education by the knowledge that they will start their working life saddled with huge debts. Had I faced the prospect of debts of £5,000 or £6,000 more than the current debts, I cannot imagine that I would have been so enthusiastic about going to university.

It is not true that the majority of graduates earn more, because women graduates earn less than the overall male average. The logical conclusion of the argument that people who earn more should pay a levy for higher education is that all men should make some contribution; but of course that is nonsense.

I am deeply concerned about the proposals. There is no doubt that the Conservatives failed to fund the expansion in higher education, with the result that the vice-chancellors in 1996 proposed what they called a "political deficiency levy" of £300. That was the Conservatives' deficiency: their failure to fund education adequately. Industry had real worries about the effect on our national wealth and ability to compete in a technological, global economy.

We must give a higher priority to finding the resources for an adequately funded higher education system, with appropriately funded research and development in our universities. The previous Government failed to do that. I know that my Government want to address the issues, and that cannot be done without major changes in the Treasury rules and in the way in which universities are funded.

To those who say that people who benefit from higher education and earn higher salaries should pay more, I say, yes, but perhaps it is better to consider that many people earning higher incomes will have benefited, or will have children who have benefited or want to benefit, from a university education.

My parents would not have been able to help me out with a penny to finance my education, but I would not want my children to start their working lives saddled with enormous loans; I, as a parent, will find it incumbent on me to help my children to pay off the loans as they go through university. That is true of most parents from affluent backgrounds, who can afford the contribution.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): Does the hon. Lady accept that many parents who are expected to pay parental contributions currently do not do so? There is a qualitative difference between paying for tuition fees and paying for maintenance, because maintenance is controllable, but if those parents who have been assessed as affluent enough to pay for tuition fees do not do so, that is a bar to entering university in the first place.

Dr. Jones: I would not want to say that the parents who do not contribute to their children's education would necessarily make that distinction. I suspect that those who do not contribute are people from lower middle-class backgrounds who find it a struggle to supply that assistance, or people from working-class backgrounds who do not value education—we must do something about that—but the majority of parents give what they can afford.

Some parents already give large sums in excess of what is required by the parental contribution assessment: the average figure is £631 per student per annum, but I bet that that is heavily skewed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady's time is up. I call Mr. John Bercow.

6.24 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): It is a pleasure to add my tribute to the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden). It was a witty, stimulating and intelligent contribution, of which he can be justly proud. He referred to the availability and calibre of bed-and-breakfast accommodation in Blackpool. If my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) were here, he would be able readily to testify to the accuracy of those comments, as the accommodation that he found in Blackpool was both high quality and extremely cheap. I am sure that the House will join me in looking forward to many future contributions of comparable calibre from the hon. Gentleman.

The Government's handling of student finance has not been adroit or sure-footed; it has been faltering and inept from the outset. They got into difficulty first and foremost because their approach was based on a deception. My right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made the point, and it bears repetition, that, during the general election campaign, the then Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, said on 14 April—it was reproduced in the *Evening Standard*, so the veracity of the statement is not in question—

"Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education."

If that was not enough, the Foreign Secretary, as he is now, amplified the point in an interview with Leeds Student Radio a mere 10 days later. He observed:

"We are quite clear that tuition costs must be met by the state."

If the purpose and effect of those statements was not to persuade people that the Labour party would not introduce tuition fees in any shape or form, it is difficult to know precisely what the intended interpretation was. It is shameful that the Government misled people, and they have got into grave difficulty as a result: they conned people into thinking that continuing state finance would be the order of the day; it is not. They gave no advance notice and they are therefore responsible for a breach of trust, of faith and of understanding with the electorate, whose support they were then inviting.

A mere 90 days after the Foreign Secretary, then shadow Foreign Secretary, had said explicitly that it was the state's duty to pick up the bill, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment had the brass neck to come to the House and announce the proposal to introduce tuition fees. That is at the root of the Government's difficulties.

Mr. Willis: Is not it equal brass neck that a shadow spokesman spells out from the Front Bench the Tories' policy on tuition fees while their candidate in the Winchester by-election says exactly the opposite to students? Is not that hypocrisy?

Mr. Bercow: My former hon. Friend, Mr. Malone, was an outstanding Member of Parliament, and I am certain that, after 20 November, he will be so once again.

Not only have the Government misled people about their intentions: they are guilty on several other fronts. They propose to misuse the proceeds of the new tax that they have introduced—I use the word tax advisedly. Consistently, their rhetoric—I suspect that this is true of the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office as it is of others on the Government Benches—has contained an insistence that higher education is underfunded and that more funds should be ploughed into the sector. One would assume that the logical corollary of that thesis would be that if new funds were raised—in this case through tuition fees—they would be ploughed back directly into the system. So far, however, we have managed to discover that only about £125 million out of the £150 million that is envisaged to be raised will be invested in higher education.

That information has been dragged out of the Government; they have not offered it voluntarily to the House, which is deeply regrettable. It is inconsistent with the position that they consistently advanced in the past. Higher education will be underfunded. Instead of supporting students, the Government propose to short-change them. That is a serious matter.

The problem of access to higher education is also serious. There are strong arguments in support of tuition fees, but the idea that there is a justification for a sudden change of policy, of which the public received no notification before the election and which they were assured would not happen, is much less powerful. The dangers are very real. Some Labour Members are deeply dissatisfied with the policy; I think of the hon. Members for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) and for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan). I must not leave out the distinguished hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who is profoundly dissatisfied with every component part of the Government's higher education policy.

The fact that there has been a 16 per cent. downturn in applications ought to be a matter of serious concern to the Secretary of State and his hon. Friends; it should not be lightly dismissed. If people now fear to go into higher education, that is a worrying problem. The Government must reckon with that problem because it is incompatible with their ambition for greater access to, and participation in, higher education.

The problems that I have described are severe enough, but they have been compounded by two others. First, there was the breathtaking incompetence over the gap year. There was an extraordinary saga of misinformation and tergiversation by the Government. At first, there was going to be no provision for gap-year students. In rushing helter-skelter to make an announcement after Sir Ron Dearing had reported, the Government had not considered what to do. Two weeks later, they said that there would be an allowance for people who were prepared to do three months of voluntary work. They suddenly announced that that was unworkable and that the 19,000 students involved would be admitted on the 1997 arrangements.

I still have constituents—I hope that there will be a response from the Minister on this in his winding-up speech—who are losing out because, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said, they made considered applications once they had received their A-level results. One such person, who comes from the lovely village of Cuddington in my constituency, is currently working, as she always intended to, at a school

[Mr. Bercow]

in Malawi where she helps the boys as a matron. She is doing good work for a year. She got good results and she always intended to go into higher education. However, she will not benefit from the concession the Government have announced. There is no intellectual justification for the arbitrary distinction that Ministers have drawn.

The Government should have the guts, the political dexterity and the will to stand up to the Treasury, and to secure the outcome that they need and that the interests of our students warrant. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State may chunter from a sedentary position, as has become his wont. I invite him to exercise what modicum of self-restraint he is able to muster in the circumstances.

I must direct one further gentle salvo at the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office. I understand his predicament. It must be a source of the most stupefying embarrassment to have to come to the House today after his cack-handed, incompetent handling of the situation in Scotland. We assume that the Government's decision is testimony to their disbelief in equal treatment for every resident of the United Kingdom, and it is shameful. St Andrews, Dundee, Edinburgh and the other Scottish universities will demonstrate beyond peradventure the damage that the Minister's misjudgment has caused.

The Government's approach has been characterised by deception, iniquity and incompetence. The losers are the students and our higher education system. For that reason, I hope—I doubt that this will happen—that the Minister will have the good grace and courtesy to apologise to the House this evening.

6.34 pm

Mr. Michael Ancram (Devizes): This has been a worthwhile, interesting and revealing debate. We heard a maiden speech by the hon. Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) on which I congratulate him. I say in a friendly way that I look forward to the days when the conventions of the House allow us to hit back at his speeches.

We heard a number of powerful speeches by my right hon. and hon. Friends. I think particularly of the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), who rightly pointed out the missing faces on the Government Benches today—the dogs that did not bark, the disappeared and those who were told that they had better keep away.

My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) rightly reminded us of the Conservative Government's record, when we saw the number of students entering higher education increase from one in eight to one in three.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am new to the customs of this House. Is it customary for only 12 Opposition Members to be present for the summing up in an Opposition day debate?

Mr. Ancram: The hon. Gentleman might count the proportion of Members on the Government side compared with the proportion on our side. One of the difficulties of having a very large majority is that questions such as the hon. Gentleman's tend to rebound. We certainly made up for numbers in terms of the quality of the speeches we made.

My hon. Friend the Member for Guildford made a powerful speech in which he reminded us of the Conservative Government's achievements. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) reminded us that, for all their protestations to the contrary, the Government have not endorsed the Dearing report and that their policies are not on all fours with that report. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) made it clear that the Government have misled people about their policies.

The most extraordinary thing about the debate has been the fact that many speeches made by Labour Members have been consistent in only one respect—that none of them supported the Government's policy of higher tuition fees. Labour Members blamed the previous Conservative Government and talked all around the subject, but they avoided tuition fees like a ghost avoids garlic.

The worst culprit was the Secretary of State himself. On three occasions, he was asked a question and, on each occasion, he failed consummately to defend the policy, obviously because he is embarrassed by it. The reasons for his embarrassment are also clear. He failed again, as he had previously, to explain what his leader, the Prime Minister meant when, on 14 April—I quote his words, as have many of my colleagues—he said:

"Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education."

We were told the other day by the Prime Minister that he said that because the Dearing report had not yet come out. Why did he not say that the Government would have to wait for Dearing? He did not say that. He said during the election campaign to the people of this country that Labour had no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education.

What does the Secretary of State believe that students were led to understand by the Prime Minister's statement? Were they to understand that the Government would wait for the Dearing report or that tuition fees would be introduced? Alternatively, were they to understand before they voted that the Government had no intention of introducing tuition fees for higher education? That is an important point, which must be answered.

Throughout the election campaign and beyond, Labour Members have told us that they are to be trusted, that they have made a contract with the British people and that we can have confidence in their words, yet here we have a blatant example of an undertaking given during the election which has been refuted 100 per cent. by Labour's policies in government.

I shall now deal with the other question that has arisen during the debate—Scottish students and English students attending Scottish universities. I have had a soft spot for the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office, who will respond to the debate, since the days in 1979 when he and I campaigned together on the no side in the devolution referendum campaign. He made a powerful argument then about the need for parity between the respective parts of the United Kingdom. He has obviously changed his mind on devolution, but to judge from Labour's education policy, as enunciated over the past few weeks, he has also changed his mind about parity.

For all the huffing and puffing, the facts are straightforward. Scottish students at Scottish universities will not have to pay the tuition fee for the fourth year of degrees, and nor will Italian, German, French, Spanish Greek or southern Irish students, but English, Welsh and Northern Irish students will. The Government call that fair. They say that that creates equity in the system. Is it fair for a German student to be paid for in a way that a Northern Ireland student cannot be? Is it fair for an English student at Edinburgh to pay £1,000 for the final year when a Greek student gets it for free?

I have just seen an answer from the Minister to one of my colleagues that says that tuition fees are expected to be £1,000 a year and will be increased in line with inflation for subsequent years. That is an interesting departure. Until now, students had thought that it was bad enough having to find £1,000 a year but, given the previous Labour Government's record on inflation—taking average inflation over their last period of office—students will have to find another £150 a year in their first year, and every year afterwards. Once again, the Labour Government speak with one voice in one direction and another in another. The Government call it fairness when Scots will, rightly, still be able, without penalty of a tuition fee, to come to English universities but English students will have to pay to go the other way. That is the fairness of the madhouse, compounded by the arrogance of the Minister in responding to criticisms.

I am not going to personalise the debate but I should like to refer to the editorial of *The Scotsman* on 30 October, which said that the Minister had reacted to criticism with rancour and stated that it

"would matter less, of course, if Mr. Wilson's job did not matter so much. Yet whether making a hash of statutory appraisal, a botch of national testing, a mess of nursery vouchers, being posted missing during the gap year fiasco, or making a spectacle of himself over tuition fees, Mr. Wilson has at least been consistent in his attitude to opposition: he is right until proven wrong."

Hon. Members who have spoken today have comprehensively proved that the Minister is wrong. When the principals of the Scottish universities say that their institutions are endangered by the Government's policy, it is not enough for him to say that they are talking "hyperbolic nonsense"; he must address their points. I have some questions that I hope that he will answer in this debate.

What budget will bear the cost of the fourth-year subsidy? Will it come from the Scottish block, and what will have to be forgone to pay for it? From what budget will the cost of European students in their fourth year come? Will that come from the Scottish budget? If so, what is the expected cost? How can the Government justify that the Scottish block should bear the cost of students from Greece, France, Germany and southern Ireland when it is not prepared to bear the cost of students from England, Northern Ireland and Wales?

Are the Government really arguing, as I understood from an earlier answer, that the first year of a Scottish degree is not of university standard, so that English students can come to their university degrees a year late? If so, why is not the same argument made for European students who come into Scottish higher education? Is it not an insult to the basis of higher education in Scotland that such a suggestion should be made?

For four years, I was the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland. How many Northern Ireland students will be affected by having to pay for a fourth year? What will that do for the close link between the higher education systems of Scotland and Northern Ireland, which has been a matter of pride for the two countries for many years? Is it the Government's intention ultimately to make Scottish higher education for Scots alone? What will that do for the quality and reputation of Scottish universities?

Mr. Wilson: Shame.

Mr. Ancram: The Minister may say that, but it was he who argued last week that the numbers were insignificant. He argued that all that mattered in Scottish education was that Scottish students were supported and devil take the hindmost. If he denies that, what robust calculation has been made about the overall viability of Scottish higher education institutions if students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland stop coming? How many would be threatened with closure? Where would the closures take place? Again, the Minister laughs, but there are people in the Scottish higher education system who predict that that will be the outcome of his policy.

Mr. Wilson: I did not laugh; I looked astonished because the right hon. Gentleman knows something about Scotland and cannot possibly believe that what is proposed will have a significant effect on the number of students who come from outside Scotland to Scottish universities, not least because more than half of them will not be touched by tuition fees at all.

Mr. Ancram: The hon. Gentleman is closing his ears to what is being said by the principals of the Scottish universities. We have heard evidence from St. Andrews university that the number of students applying from England is going down as a result of the policy. If he is to be worthy of his office, he must stop blocking his ears and treating the matter with the arrogance of his talk of hyperbolic nonsense. He must start listening to those who know about higher education in Scotland: those who have to operate within it.

The whole policy has been a saga of incompetence, deceit, indecision, muddle and, ultimately, discrimination. That can serve only to undermine confidence in higher education across the United Kingdom but particularly in Scotland. If that is yet another example of the arrogance of this Government, who believe that rhetoric rather than reality is what counts and that public criticism of them is a new form of heresy, they will learn from us, and, increasingly, from the public, that that is not the case. They have to listen to what people say to them. If today's debate is anything to go by, they will learn it soon enough from their own Back Benchers. If the Minister had looked around, he would have seen that the faces behind him had all the warmth of the gathering storm.

We welcome the expansion of higher education and recognise the good work that has been proposed by Dearing, but we condemn the Government's deliberate attempt to ignore and distort the report. I ask the House to support the motion.

6.46 pm

The Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): This debate has been a great intellectual reinforcement of what we are doing.

[Mr. Brian Wilson]

As exercises in amnesia allied to brass neck go, even by Tory standards, this has been a classic. The right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) gives a new meaning to the term cross-border flow. Even though he was a Member of Parliament for most of the 18 years during which the Tories were in power, he made no attempt to explain why the funding crisis in higher education that the Dearing committee was set up to address even exists.

I congratulate my hon. Friends on some excellent contributions. In particular, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden) on an excellent maiden speech. I congratulate him not only on being the first Labour Member for Blackpool, South but on being a Labour Member with a majority of 11,616. That may remind some Conservative Members of the realities of the past 18 years. I thought that his contribution, particularly in rebutting the golden age mythology of higher education, was outstanding.

As was pointed out, I did indeed benefit from the Scottish higher education system but I am mindful of the fact that when I benefited from it, I was the one in 14 of Scottish school leavers who did so. I am acutely and humbly aware that many of the 13 who did not go into higher education were every bit as able and eligible to benefit from it as I was but that the funding regime in place at the time meant that they never had the chance of seeing the inside of a university. Whatever else we can say about the Tories, we cannot deny that they increased the numbers in higher education.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Hear, hear.

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman says, "Hear, hear," but the tragedy, the disgrace and ultimately the hypocrisy of tonight's debate is that the previous Government did not provide the money to follow the students. As a result, Scotland has 44 per cent. participation in higher education, but the funding per student—the money that follows the student into higher education—has dropped by 40 per cent. under the Tories. That is what created the crisis in higher education.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): On the question of funding, is my hon. Friend aware that some of the small to medium-sized institutions such as Stirling, 31 per cent of whose student intake comes from outside Scotland, are extremely worried? Can he give the House an assurance that due account will be taken of that, as we could experience a drop in student numbers and places not being filled as a consequence of the fourth-year rule? Will he bear that in mind in his calculations?

Mr. Wilson: I shall come to that later in my speech. I am sure I will satisfy my hon. Friend that those fears have been greatly exaggerated.

Congratulations are also due to the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) on producing a splendid leaflet written on behalf of the Tory candidate in Winchester, which portrays a somewhat unrecognisable slimline figure, besweatered on the campus like a latter-day Winchester Daniel Cohn-Bendit and promising to stand four square to back the student fight. It says that a vote for Gerry Malone will ensure that the issue is not allowed to go away. Presumably, if Gerry Malone had been here today, there would have been six rather than five Tory Back Benchers behind the shadow Secretary of State for Education and Employment. That is a true measure of Tory concern for students—*[Interruption.]* There were only five behind the shadow Secretary of State when he opened the debate. I can count and see. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There is far too much noise from the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr. Wilson: Most of them have only just woken up, so they have a lot of energy to get rid of, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

There are three key elements in the Government's policy. First, we aim to put substantial additional funds into higher and further education. We are committed to increasing the number of students in higher education, but because of the Tories' record, the money is not there. Secondly, one third of students in higher education and 40 per cent. in Scotland will continue to pay no tuition fees because of the application of the means test. It shows real political irresponsibility when politicians from any party try to give the impression that every student would be paying £1,000 a year when that bears no relation to reality.

Mr. Jenkin: It is not fair, is it?

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman says that it is not fair, but we are not talking about what is fair to me or to the Government. We are talking about the fact that it is not fair that people from less well-off backgrounds should be frightened away from higher education by the irresponsible scaremongering of people such as him.

Thirdly, the vast majority of graduates will repay less than they do under the current scheme which we inherited from the Tories: it is absolutely crucial that people realise that. Taken together, those elements—more money for higher education; 40 per cent. of Scottish students and one third of those throughout the United Kingdom being exempt from tuition fees; and the vast majority repaying less each month—represent a package that need deter nobody from a lower-income background from entering higher education.

Mr. Dorrell: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that last time one of his ministerial colleagues with responsibility for education spoke about irresponsible scaremongering, Baroness Blackstone was obliged to make a total retreat from her position a week later? Is he about to make a similar announcement? While he is answering that question, will he also explain to the House whether he is describing the view of the Scottish higher education principals as irresponsible scaremongering?

Mr. Wilson: Let us be clear about gap funding. There was a statement on gap funding at the conclusion of the discussions on it. However, there was no U-turn because there was no initial statement of the opposite—*[Interruption.]* Public school histrionics are the privilege of a Tory Opposition, but they do not change the facts. I am interested that the right hon. Gentleman and a number of his colleagues slavishly read out their brief, now appearing to take as gospel truth everything said by

university principals as if it came down to them on tablets of stone. For a long time under the Tories, university principals were saying that more money should be pumped into universities: the Tories never reacted to that in such a positive way—all they did was cut, cut and cut again.

Those who know about Scottish education know that St. Andrews is a rather distinctive case because 41 per cent. of its students are from England. That is fine. I am all in favour of diversity. But that is in marked contrast with the position of Paisley university, where 4 per cent. of students are from England, or Robert Gordon university, where 3.5 per cent. of students are from England.

I know from his political history that the right hon. Member for Devizes is a very naive politician, but even he need not accept as biblical prophesy every word that comes from the principal of St. Andrews university. If he is aware of the geography of Scotland, may I suggest that he goes a little further south and listens to the much more reasoned, rational and measured comments of the principal of Edinburgh university, which has an even higher proportion of English students than St. Andrews? *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman says, "It is very worrying." He has made an interesting statement that it is very worrying that the principal of Edinburgh university should take a more rational view of these matters.

Mr. Ancram: The hon. Gentleman misheard me. I said that Edinburgh university is very worried. I have spoken to a number of senior people there recently. In the few moments that remain, will he take the opportunity to answer the question from the hon. Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill) about the fairness of the policy that he is introducing in Scotland?

Mr. Wilson: If Opposition Members will stop baying and guffawing for a moment, I shall be delighted to do so, but leopards cannot change their spots and I very much doubt whether they will do so.

I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Devizes has heard of the Garrick report. He looks very puzzled when I mention it. That report contained a request that I ensured equity for Scottish students in universities taking a four-year degree which had parity of esteem with the English three-year degree. That is exactly what we have done.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Wilson: The hon. Gentleman clearly wants to use up part of the three minutes that remain. I shall not give way to the silly man. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. I expect Opposition Front-Bench Members to set a good example.

Mr. Wilson: What we are witnessing is a veneer of indignation built on a very deep trough of ignorance, and Conservative Members do not want to hear anything that threatens to expose that ignorance.

The Garrick committee recommended that,

"if a graduate contribution is introduced, the Secretary of State should ensure that the contribution from Scottish graduates for qualifications gained in Scotland is equitable with the contribution for comparable qualifications gained elsewhere in the UK."

The Government have delivered exactly what Garrick recommended.

Let me educate the shadow spokesman. There is no perfect symmetry within the United Kingdom higher education system because there are different school qualifications and different higher education qualifications. As soon as we try to match them in order to resolve one anomaly, we run the risk of creating another anomaly. That is the reality, as the right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well. We have tried to give the optimum, fairest possible deal to the maximum number of students and we have succeeded.

Let me turn to the legitimate concern expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil (Mr. O'Neill). Of course there are concerns about numbers, but we can take out various categories of student—the Tories know nothing about this subject. Let us take out the third of students coming from the rest of the United Kingdom who are exempt from means testing for tuition fees; the 10 per cent. who come in the second year to Scottish honours degree courses; and the 10 per cent. of English, Welsh and Northern Irish students who do ordinary degrees. After doing that, we are left with that small minority who are asked to pay the £1,000 tuition fees.

If the principals and everyone else went out and told the truth, they would frighten away many fewer students and do Scottish higher education a big favour. The important thing is to get more people from a wider range of social backgrounds into higher education in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The Tories failed to do that, because they did not care. We are going to advance from the position in my day, when only one in 14 students went into higher education. In Scotland, we are going to get more than 50 per cent. of students into higher and further education and they will come from all social backgrounds. None of the scaremongering from Opposition parties will forestall that aim.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 139, Noes 373.

Division No. 80] **[7 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher

Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir David Madel and
Mr. John M. Taylor.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cleland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jennifer *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul

Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'hs)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jon Owen Jones and Ms Bridget Prentice.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 311, Noes 169.

Division No. 81] **[7.18 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*

Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenniler *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jon Owen Jones and Ms Bridget Prentice.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Cynog
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John

Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Don Foster and
Mr. Phil Willis.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the decisive response of Her Majesty's Government to the report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education and to the crisis of funding in higher education bequeathed by the previous administration; notes with approval the new arrangements for supporting students, including fair repayment arrangements and targeted help for the most disadvantaged; and welcomes the commitment to ensuring that more people will have opportunities to participate in high-quality education to their benefit and to the benefit of the country as a whole.

Rural Life

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Before I call the first speaker, I inform the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister. I remind the House that there is a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

7.32 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I beg to move,

That this House expresses its concern about the economic and environmental pressures currently affecting the rural economy and rural life; calls upon Her Majesty's Government to respond to this situation by protecting farmers from the effects of the appreciation of sterling, withdrawing the Government-imposed ceiling on the weight of cattle entering the BSE over thirty months scheme and undertaking without precondition discussions with farmers and their representatives about the level of payments to be made through the 1997–98 Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances scheme; and condemns the proposals to extend access to the countryside by means of a legal right to roam rather than voluntary agreement, not to introduce policies to protect small village shops and rural post offices, to create urban-based regional development agencies, to weaken planning controls designed to protect the Green Belt and the countryside, and to threaten the pursuit of traditional country sports.

I find myself at the Dispatch Box as a result of the sad resignation of my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) from the post that I now hold. He carried out his job as shadow Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food with distinction following his ministerial career in that Department. He has made his decision for his own reasons, which he has stated. I know that he wishes to contribute to the debate this evening, and I wish him well in the future.

The motion standing in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends deals with the threats to rural life and the rural economy arising from the Government's actions. We shall address issues such as the decline in farm incomes, the future of the hill livestock compensatory allowance, access to the countryside, country sports, and the situation with rural development agencies. My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) will deal with a whole raft of environmental issues that are threatening the countryside at present. It is hardly surprising that the countryside believes that it is under siege, but it is interesting that Labour Members should express surprise about that.

I note that the amendment put down by the Liberal Democrats—the junior partners in government—which you did not select, Mr. Deputy Speaker, agrees largely with the line that we have taken and that we shall debate this evening. We should not be surprised that the countryside feels under siege as a result of the Government's actions.

I referred to the Labour manifesto—it is always useful to see where a party is coming from—and, after an assiduous search, I discovered the 20 words in that manifesto that amount to an agriculture policy. One of those words was "Labour" and the other 19 dealt vaguely with agriculture. On the basis of such a thin diet, not only do the Government not have a coherent rural policy but they cannot claim to speak for the countryside, as Labour Members do from time to time.

It is interesting to consider what the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been up to since May. I used the modern technology of the internet to see if I could find anything that constituted a coherent rural

[Mr. Michael Jack]

policy. The only document I found that used the word "comprehensive" was a spending review. That was the only reference to rural policy to be found in MAFF press releases. The way that Ministers' minds were working is clear from the way in which they caved in to Treasury pressure. The press release entitled "MAFF Conducts Comprehensive Spending Review" states that the Government aim

"To examine the contribution of HLCAs towards meeting the objectives identified and to examine any other options for achieving those objectives more cost effectively or in ways which otherwise minimise public expenditure"—

the cat was well and truly out of the bag as long ago as 29 July when the Minister was under pressure to reduce public expenditure—

"and maximise the positive impact on the economy."

The Minister wants to boast to the rest of the non-rural world about how he has cut expenditure in that area. He winds up by saying:

"The consideration of possible options should not be limited to agricultural support measures."

Goodness knows what is going on. No wonder there is uncertainty in the countryside and that it feels under siege.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Is it not hypocritical of the Minister to talk in those terms when Labour inherited a bill for £3.5 billion arising from the BSE disaster?

Mr. Jack: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman anticipates a rapid change of Government that would translate me immediately to the other Dispatch Box. Would the hon. Gentleman not have afforded that degree of support to farmers as a result of the BSE difficulties? It was right and proper to support the farmers at a time of considerable stress. It is no use Labour Members mocking me. Successive Ministers of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the former Conservative Government followed the scientific advice that they were given and acted properly in the interests of food and farming. They fought our corner in Europe until Professor Pattison's announcement. This debate is not solely about BSE, but I am happy to discuss the matter with the hon. Gentleman—perhaps on a Wednesday morning—and to defend our position robustly.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food claims to speak for the countryside: he claims to be in touch with rural Britain. What was one of his earliest acts? On 28 May, the Minister who wants to be in touch with the countryside scrapped the MAFF regional panels—the one lifeline of communication with the countryside. He replaced it with Ministers having to go hither and thither, the length and breadth of England, listening to farmers and talking to the food industry. They will be breathless if they try to carry out the work of the regional panels. *[Interruption.]* I hear the Parliamentary Secretary, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), saying, "We will do it." I suggest that he read the *Grower*, for example, where his ministerial colleague the noble Lord Donoughue is reported only for cancelling meetings—not a good example of getting out and about so as to be in touch with the countryside.

Cutting off those rural panels was not a very clever thing to do if the Minister and his team want to keep in touch. The people involved will feel cheated because they made a significant contribution to ensuring that the previous Government were kept up to speed about rural and countryside issues and the benefit of that knowledge will no longer be available to the Minister.

It is hardly surprising that Labour Ministers go about their business in this way. One has only to read the Government amendment that has been selected for debate. It is pretty old, tired politics for the Minister to fall back on words such as

"deplores the neglect of the countryside and rural areas over the past eighteen years".

I am delighted that behind me this evening is my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), a distinguished former Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whose track record in fighting for the interests of British farmers during a period of reform of the common agricultural policy is second to none. He defended the interests of Britain's farmers, as did the former Member, William Waldegrave, my boss when I was in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. But for his hard work, animal welfare would not be an issue on the European agenda. The Government's tawdry charge that the previous Administration did not look after the countryside for 18 years does not wash.

I remind the Minister that since 1992, farm incomes went up by 85 per cent. when we were in charge. I remind him that our work on Food From Britain has helped more than 1,000 companies to develop their food exports. We have some of the highest welfare standards in Europe as a result of our stewardship of countryside matters. We brought in massive deregulation and the opening up of agricultural markets with the removal of the Potato Marketing Board and the milk marketing boards. That is a record of which my right hon. and hon. Friends can be proud. I dismiss the first line of the Minister's amendment to my motion.

The amendment goes on and

"congratulates the Government on its commitment to the countryside".

Twenty words in a manifesto do not add up to a commitment, and the cancelling of the regional panels seems more like cancelling a commitment than building one.

Further on in the amendment, we get to the real issue:

"the Government's intention to create the conditions necessary to let the rural economy flourish".

We will speak about declining farm incomes, the tawdry way in which the Government are dealing with hill farmers, the burden on dairy farmers of the work that they have done on the over-30-months scheme, and other issues.

Then we read the hidden agenda—the Government's intention to

"enhance the rural environment and to enable everyone to enjoy the countryside".

If that is not shorthand for the right to roam, I do not know what is.

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): My right hon. Friend will realise that hill farm incomes have fallen by 20 per cent. Recently, farmers in Northumberland tackled the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), to ask what he intended to do about hill livestock compensatory allowance payments. The Minister replied:

"I thought there was some better news around—but I have forgotten what it is."

Will my right hon. Friend press the Minister of State to see whether he can remember what good news he had for hill farmers?

Mr. Jack: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I tried to find out what the Minister of State said at the Great North Meet. According to a newspaper report,

"Mr. Rooker told the Great North Meet in North Yorkshire that 'there is better news floating around the system than there was in the summer.'"

What is this system? Is this some new agricultural world in which Ministers live? It is hardly surprising that they are cut off from the countryside; they are in the system, and there is something floating about in it—probably the Minister.

The Minister of State went on to make this devastating commitment—[HON. MEMBERS: "Get on with it."] I am sorry if Labour Members do not like the truth, but this is what their Minister is saying. He said that Labour

"will not walk away from hill farmers—because we recognise the contribution they make to the upland landscape, the countryside"

and so on. All the soft words in the world do not take away from the fact that, as I shall outline in greater detail, he has already told hill farmers, "I am taking away £60 million from the hill livestock compensatory allowance. You are back to 1996. I do not care what arguments you put, because I am not going to listen to you. You are not going to come and see me—"

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Dr. John Cunningham): Later I will welcome the right hon. Gentleman and congratulate him on his appointment, but now I will intervene as briefly as I can. The right hon. Gentleman was a Treasury Minister in the previous Administration. Did they make any provision for continuing that support in this financial year or next year?

Mr. Jack: As the right hon. Gentleman is not a Treasury Minister, I suggest that he goes back to the Red Book, where he will find that there is a year-on-year increase. I will explain later how he can easily afford that within his budget, as he will also know the way in which the European public expenditure survey works. Let us have none of this nasty business of tripping me up at this stage. I suggest that the Minister does his homework and goes back and looks at the Red Book, where he will see that for the next financial year there is an increase, not a decrease, compared with this financial year.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Perhaps in the course of his remarks my right hon. Friend will ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food not whether there was a provision but whether he even asked the Treasury for something for HLCAs.

Mr. Jack: My right hon. Friend is right. That is why under the fundamental expenditure review I concentrated on the fact that the Minister had already given it away before he started on the current exercise of not listening to the hill farmers. I do not think that he bothered to ask the Treasury, and he should speak to his own accounting officer. I shall try to help him out later and find him some money, as I have done a little homework on that.

I remind the right hon. Gentleman that under our tutelage and our stewardship of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whereas at one time agriculture accounted for 73 per cent. of the European budget, we helped to negotiate that down to 50 per cent. Our record of agricultural stewardship stands examination.

If the Minister wants to attack us for the past 18 years, why has he, together with his colleague from the Department of the Environment, not had the courage to say that he will produce a parallel to "Rural England 1996", which contains 140 separate commitments from my party to the countryside? It is the only comprehensive record of countryside policy that exists. The Government do not have one.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): The right hon. Gentleman commended to the House his Government's stewardship of the countryside over the past 18 years. How would he account for the fact that the landslide on 1 May was almost as impressive in the countryside as it was in the towns? Some 50 seats there fell to the Labour party on 1 May and several more fell to the Liberal Democrats. Can he account for that phenomenon?

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman should look at a map, and he should listen to the voices of disillusion, especially from the hills. He would realise that people understand the message from the Opposition.

Let us deal with the meat of the debate. The first item that we want to discuss is farm incomes. The Minister knows that farmers face severe problems because of the appreciation of sterling against the ecu. One of my hon. Friends mentioned an increase of some 20 per cent. The Minister seems to have ignored the effect on farm incomes of the two summer revaluations in the green pound, which took place since his party has been responsible for agriculture policy.

Some of that is connected with the fact that the Government have abrogated their responsibility for the setting of interest rates and given it away to the Bank of England. I am sure that if we had been in charge none of that would have occurred. Labour has some responsibility for what has happened to sterling in respect of the appreciation against the green pound and the reductions in farm income that have taken place.

Despite the fact that a freeze occurred on certain green rates within some support schemes, the National Farmers Union has calculated that given the effect on prices of agriculture commodities there has been a loss in output value terms of between £1.7 billion and £1.8 billion. Higher estimates have been circulated, but I have chosen to quote lower figures because I believe that they are realistic. It has been suggested that losses could have been as high as £3.5 billion, a sum equivalent to that which we spent on bovine spongiform encephalopathy.

The Minister will be aware that a new compensation mechanism was agreed under the new agri-monetary regime, which I am sure has been considered in considerable detail. I remember when the matter was debated in the House, when to the best of my recollection the then Labour Opposition did not oppose the adoption by the United Kingdom of the then proposals. I take that to mean that the then Labour Opposition agreed with them.

[Mr. Jack]

It is interesting that the Minister, who appeared before the Select Committee on Agriculture today, admitted under questioning, so it is reported, that about £980 million could be available to the United Kingdom for compensation for loss of value of farm output. That applies to losses incurred in the dairy, beef, cereals and sugar sectors. What do the Government intend to do within the remit of the mechanism?

So far the Minister has shown no enthusiasm for dealing with the problems now besetting certain agricultural sectors as a result of a severe and sudden drop in income. As the Minister knows, other member states facing circumstances similar to those confronting the United Kingdom have used the mechanism to which I have referred. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will comment on that. Germany, in particular, argued for the implementation of the mechanism when it, too, was facing a similar situation to that experienced by the United Kingdom. The Minister owes it to the House to explain why he chooses not to use the mechanism that was urged especially by Germany to deal with the broad range of issues, and why he is not prepared to do that in compensating farmers for the losses that they have incurred up to January 1998.

Is the Minister prepared to consider some of the sectoral impacts of the fall in farm incomes? He will know that in spite of the efforts to help the beef sector it continues to face considerable difficulties, certainly in terms of values.

Dr. John Cunningham: Whose fault is that?

Mr. Jack: It is all very well for the Minister to ask whose fault it is. The Minister is responsible for these matters and he represents the Government's views. The Opposition are asking questions on behalf of Britain's farmers in the rural community, and he owes them an answer. If the Minister is not prepared to compensate across the board, is he prepared to focus on the hardest-hit sectors? I am thinking especially of beef, sheep and dairy. Milk prices have fallen substantially and given the appreciation of sterling there is considerable import pressure. Surely the right hon. Gentleman can bring himself to focus on the genuine needs of the sectors to which I have referred, given the circumstances that I have described.

The second and substantive part of the motion relates to hill farming. I have alluded already to the cavalier way in which the Minister appears to be treating hill farmers. It is interesting to reflect on the terms in which the previous Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food announced that there would be an additional £60 million for hill and upland farmers. His announcement was the result of the normal discussions with hard-pressed hill farmers, and an additional £60 million was included in the hill livestock compensatory allowance for that year.

The Minister will know that rates have traditionally been set as a result of discussion between the Minister of the day and territorial representatives of each of the major farming organisations. So far, as I understand it, those representatives have been sent to talk to their territorial Ministers, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food having refused to meet them.

In a press release last year, the Minister stated:

"This has been a difficult year for cattle farmers in the less-favoured areas."

The right hon. Gentleman acknowledged the difficulties that were faced that year. Hill farmers will have reminded the Minister that the year to which they are looking in terms of HLCA will be no less difficult.

How has the Government's attitude been viewed so far in the farming press? *Farmers Weekly* on 19 September described the Minister's stance as "wanton vandalism". It stated:

"There can be no other way to describe the government's decision to abandon hill farming to the chill winds of market economics. It has delivered two, possibly fatal, body blows to the future of hill farming."

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend is being slightly unfair to the Minister. Surely the Minister is holding his meeting back until he can welcome the representatives of the farming organisations into his new offices, having spent £1 million of taxpayers' money tarting them up so that he can have a meeting. He does not want to have a meeting any earlier as there might then be suspicions that the refurbished offices are merely for his own interests and not to be shared by anyone else.

Mr. Jack: My right hon. Friend is right. Given that the hill farmers are struggling to keep a roof over the Minister's head, I am sure that he has taken careful note of what my right hon. Friend has said.

I shall put before the House an interesting letter that I received. In 1994 a Labour Member wrote these words to a farmer in Richmond about HLCAs:

"We in the Labour Party recognise how important this payment is to hill farmers. We recognise the important role hill farmers have, both in terms of rural employment, environmental management and tourism. In that respect we do believe that HLCAs do offer very good value for money and we will strongly oppose any move by the government to reduce them."

Those comfortable words to hill farmers were uttered by none other than the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Mr. Morley), in a letter to Mr. Davy of Richmond. How thin that diet now appears as the Minister connives with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to face hill farming with a difficult situation.

Let us consider what a letter from No. 10 Downing street tells us on the same subject. A letter to the same Mr. Davy of the Hill Farming Initiative contains the following:

"Let me confirm straightaway that the Government is committed to the idea that hill farmers need special help".

That shows that the Government are thinking about the issue, but they are not exactly backing up their thinking with very much action.

The Minister wrote to Alistair Davy on 22 October 1997:

"I know from my own constituency that incomes are under pressure".

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. More than 40 per cent. of hill farmers in England and Wales earn less than £10,000 a year. The Minister is choosing, however, to take a large sum away from these farmers.

I want the Minister, if he will, to concentrate on the lines that have been put to me by the Hill Farming Initiative. Those involved have made it clear that if the Minister does not recant, hill farmers will be short by about £60 million. The figures show that there will be a 20 per cent. loss in hill farm incomes, and some have suggested that the loss will be even greater. Is it the Minister's understanding that the loss in hill farming incomes projected for next year for those farmers with an average net income of between £10,000 and £16,000 will be between 20 and 25 per cent? Will he admit that there are real problems for hill farmers, especially with the debt load that they are carrying?

I draw the Minister's attention to an example—

Dr. John Cunningham: Please draw to a close.

Mr. Jack: The Minister asks me to draw to a close. When the truth is hurting the answer is no—I shall continue to give the Minister information.

I pass on to the Minister for his comment some information from the Hill Farming Initiative. Those involved point out to me that a farmer last year with £18,200 of net farm income—38 beef cows, six cows in heifer, 663 ewes and 89 gimmers, which the Minister will recognise as a typical modest-sized hill farm—faced with all the changes that will ensue as a combination of green pound rates and the expected reduction in HLCAs will be about £8,000 down next year. The Minister, so far, has turned his face against the real needs of the most vulnerable in the rural economy. It seems that the Minister is hitting the weakest hardest.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Does my right hon. Friend agree that some of the principal beneficiaries of the work of the Rural Development Commission are hill farmers, who will need all the help that they can get? The RDC has a fuddy-duddy image: that it is only about thatching, shoeing horses and saddlery. It is not; it is about high-tech help for rural communities and assistance for all rural hill farm communities as well as the wider rural community. Is he aware that the RDC is due for the chop under this Government? What a mean-minded trick.

Mr. Jack: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk will deal with that matter when he winds up.

The changes that the Minister made to the over-30-months scheme bear particularly heavily on hill farmers. How did he calculate the weight restriction that he has imposed? Why did he do it? I have been informed that it was on the basis of an analysis of the Irish cattle market. He seems to have got a very Irish result. He has chosen 560 kilos as a wholly arbitrary figure for the cut-off point for the over-30-months scheme. It is one of those situations where people choose the breed of cow that best suits the marketplace, then the Minister comes along and arbitrarily decides who will get maximum help and who will not. It is about time that he explained himself. It is particularly mean-spirited as far as hard-pressed dairy farmers are concerned. The Minister owes it to the House to deal with that issue.

There are other issues that cause the countryside to feel under threat at this time. In their amendment there is a clear indication that the Government are still keen on having a legal right to roam, with all the uncertainties that that causes for the countryside. Will the Minister pay attention? These are questions to which we shall want answers. What representations will he make to his colleagues in Government about what is to be defined as moorland, heathland and downland in terms of the access schemes to be proposed? For instance, will downland that is currently farmed in a managed way be part of the open access policies? One thing that distinguishes our approach from the Government's approach is that we believed in managing access through agri-environmental schemes to applaud and support landowners who voluntarily made access to the countryside available. The Government's sole solution is to legislate. So far there is great uncertainty in the countryside about that matter.

The threats to country sports remain. I do not want at this stage to have the debate that will take place on 28 November, but I point out to the Minister that the countryside feels under siege. The pressures on rural sports are a threat to an industry which, in 1997, common resource consultants calculate to be worth £3.8 billion per year. The Government have sought, perhaps, to distance themselves from the Bill on fox hunting, which is to be debated on 28 November, but they will need to do more than that to reassure the countryside and farming interests that they have not got a long-term agenda to take away one of the most valuable contributors to the rural economy.

My right hon. and hon. Friends will make their own contributions to the debate to fill out some of the arguments that I have made, but the time has come, as the Walrus said, for the Minister to speak of many things. I hope that his reply will be forward looking and that it will respond to the real fears and concerns of country people. I want him to show that the fine words that he and his colleagues have uttered from time to time on the question of hills, the vital role that hill communities face and the work that they do in looking after that aspect of our countryside, will be sustained by his Ministry. I want him to show that he has at least some understanding of farming matters. If he does not do so, it will be absolutely clear to anybody in the country and the farming community that there is only one true voice for countryside matters in this country—the Conservative voice.

8.5 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Dr. John Cunningham): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"deplores the neglect of the countryside and rural areas over the past eighteen years by the previous administration; congratulates the Government on its commitment to the countryside; welcomes the Government's intention to create the conditions necessary to let the rural economy flourish, to protect and enhance the rural environment and to enable everyone to enjoy the countryside; and further welcomes the start already made, notably on the reform of the CAP, the review of the Organic Aid Scheme, introducing Arable Stewardship, and reviewing the legislation for the protection of hedges and SSSIs."

I welcome the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) to his new position in the shadow Cabinet. He has taken over from the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), who has an enviable record in these matters and no doubt will be sorely missed—even though they might not recognise it yet—by the rest of the shadow Cabinet. We just wonder, given the ructions in the Conservative party at the moment and his well-known views on European issues, whether the right hon. Member for Fylde will survive until Agriculture questions on Thursday.

[Dr. John Cunningham]

The right hon. Gentleman displayed a broad sense of humour in his speech and an easy facility for being rather careless with the facts. I remind him that he promised us that in the course of his speech he would tell us where he would conjure up the £60 million that is not in the provisions that we inherited from him and his colleagues in the previous Government. He made no mention of where it would come from.

Mr. Jack: I am grateful to the Minister for giving me this opportunity. Perhaps between now and the close of the debate he will ask his officials to look at the underspend on the sheep annual premium, which possibly amounts to some £200 million. Will he also confirm that if he wishes to apply to the Treasury, he has, with its agreement, the ability within his budget to redirect the money to cover the £60 million shortfall on HLCAs?

Dr. Cunningham: Nevertheless it is true, although the right hon. Gentleman refuses to acknowledge it, that the previous Government made provision for one year and one year only. They made no on-going provision for this expenditure. That is the reality.

Members of the shadow Cabinet have chosen this topic for debate on the forlorn ground that somehow they think it sensible as an area on which to attack the Government. They claim that they represent the countryside and the people who live there. Sadly for them, that is no longer—if it ever was—the case. They misrepresented the countryside. That is true. They misrepresented the countryside so badly that, on 1 May this year, the people in the countryside drove out the Tories in very large numbers and gave huge support to Labour candidates, so much so that Labour Members of Parliament not only represent more rural constituencies than Conservatives these days but represent more rural constituencies than Conservatives and Liberal Democrats put together. If there is any true voice in the countryside at the present time, it is the Labour voice that is speaking up for rural areas.

In Scotland, in rural areas or urban areas, the Tories have no voice in the House. It is the same in Wales. They have been rejected comprehensively by the Scottish and Welsh people, who have supported Labour, by and large, for a generation. I have represented one of the most rural constituencies in England for 27 years. Labour is the real party representing the countryside. The right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends were driven out because of their incompetence over 18 years in failing effectively to serve rural communities.

Let us have a brief résumé of the record. Bus deregulation has left rural communities trapped and isolated. That was one of the Conservative Government's brilliant ideas. There was the threat to privatise the Post Office in rural areas and cities, which, fortunately, was headed off by the Post Office workers. There was also a threat to rural railways and housing association homes. The Conservative Government even wanted to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales until they were defeated on that, too, by a combination of the National Farmers Union and the Transport and General Workers Union.

The Conservative Government left high, persistent, levels of unemployment, low incomes and rural deprivation. All that before we even come to their record on agriculture or fishing. They were isolated in Europe, devoid of credibility and support where it mattered in European Councils. Common agricultural policy reform was not even on the agenda when they left office. The fishing industry and fish conservation was left in a shambles. In addition, they failed to act on the sale of fishing quota, which went on under their Administration.

Mr. Jack: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: Not for the moment.

BSE gave rise to a catalogue of indecision and ineptitude, which is taking billions of pounds to rectify, and resulted in a global ban on British beef. The shambles in which the Conservative Government left the British beef industry cost the British taxpayer £1.33 billion last year and will cost more than £2 billion more in the next two to three years, yet the right hon. Gentleman dares to say that the Conservative party speaks for the countryside.

There were disastrous failures in food hygiene and a loss of confidence in food safety and in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The Conservative Government also had an abysmal record on support for organic farming, the worst in the EU. After 18 years of Conservative government only 0.3 per cent. of our farming is organic.

Labour was elected because of its real commitment to all the British people, including those in the countryside, and to rural issues. We recognise the needs of all those who live and work in rural areas, not just those who wear blue Barbour jackets and green wellies and ride around in Range Rovers, which is the epitome of the forlorn, bedraggled and minor Tory voice left in the British countryside.

Mr. Jack: Is that the best that the right hon. Gentleman can do when it comes to dealing with those on the lowest incomes, such as the hill farmers? *[Interruption.]* That is the real substance of the debate and the right hon. Gentleman had better get to it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise in the Chamber. The only voice that I should hear is that of the Minister.

Dr. Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman made a long speech and has already made two interventions. I shall get to the substance of the matter quickly—a lot more quickly than he did.

We recognise the special needs of those who live and work in rural areas and we shall ensure greater protection for wildlife, as well as people, in our rural areas. We recognise that the countryside requires careful stewardship, enabling the needs of people who live and work in rural areas to be met in a sustainable fashion. The previous Administration failed in that regard too.

We support reform of the CAP in order to reduce the burden that it imposes on taxpayers and consumers and to free resources to support the rural economy and enhance the environment. In addition, yes, we will give people greater freedom to explore their countryside. There is no doubt about our commitment to that.

The Government believe that the countryside is a vital national resource and a key part of the economy.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: No, not for the moment.

If the countryside is to be protected and enhanced, we must recognise that its purpose and identity are as important as that of towns and cities. The countryside is the workplace or home for many, as well as a place of recreation for many others. It is also the habitat for much of our wildlife. It is essential that we all strive towards sustainable use of the countryside for this and future generations.

When the right hon. Gentleman said, as he did more than once, that country sports are under threat, he was, again, completely misleading the House. There is no threat to angling or shooting in the countryside. As has already been demonstrated, there is overwhelming support in the House and in the countryside for the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster).

The Government have set out their commitment to opportunity, fairness and prosperity for all, whether they live in cities or rural areas. At the same time, they recognise the distinctive needs of people in rural communities. The Government intend to make rural areas a better place in which to live and work. That is the background against which policy will be formulated. Now I shall address some specific policies.

A healthy rural economy is central to the Government's integrated approach to rural issues. It is important for many reasons—to support our economic growth, for conservation and to combat social exclusion and poverty. Wages are still low and unemployment is still too high everywhere as a result of the Conservative Government's approach, and there are pockets of deprivation in the countryside with high unemployment, often because of the scattered nature of rural communities, the narrow economic base and the shortage of employment and training opportunities.

The Government intend to tackle all those issues in order to help create the conditions necessary to allow rural enterprise to flourish and to develop a diverse and vibrant rural economy.

Our countryside is defined by agriculture which, in turn, is largely shaped by the current system of support. That is why reform of the CAP is a major priority for the Government. To that end, we will work hard and constructively with the European Commission and our European partners, in all the EU institutions, unlike the previous Government, who were such an abysmal failure in Europe that they had no friends and no support for anything that they wanted to do.

The Commission's Agenda 2000 proposals are a welcome step towards that reform and are of major significance for rural policy. The package is not as radical as I would have wished and as the Government would have liked and there are elements in it, such as the proposal to retain milk quotas, which are disappointing. Nevertheless, it is important to have proposals on the agenda and we shall work with our colleagues in the Council and the Commission who want to progress them.

The proposals for rural agri-environment policy are also welcome. In particular, it makes sense to create integrated rural development measures which will apply throughout the Community. That offers the prospect of closer integration between environmental and rural development measures and the availability of a wider range of targeted measures outside those areas qualifying for special help. In those special areas we shall work to ensure that the UK receives a fair share of funding.

In future, the intention is that eligible rural areas will benefit from objective 1 status, in a similar way to now. Objective 5b, which has benefited a wide range of rural areas, will be phased out, but fragile rural areas will be eligible, along with others, for aid from a new objective 2 proposal. We will work to ensure that the rural parts of those new objective 2 areas receive an appropriate share of the support available.

In the longer term, further reform of the CAP will be necessary, not least as part of the next round of agriculture negotiations in the World Trade Organisation, which is due to start at the beginning of the new century. It is our intention to secure the phasing out of production-linked support. That would yield consumer benefits and substantial budgetary savings, some of which could be used to support targeted schemes to help rural development, rural economies and the rural environment.

We heard much from the right hon. Gentleman about expenditure proposals, but he did not put a price on what he had to say. That is quite a change for a former Treasury Minister who, when in government, used to stand at the Dispatch Box and demand to know the cost of every Opposition proposal. He did not do any costings of his proposal, so I took the precaution of doing some for him.

The right hon. Gentleman misled the House about green pound compensation. I said that £980 million was available under that general heading, but only half of it could come direct from Brussels; the other half would have to come from the United Kingdom. Thanks to the negotiations carried out by the previous Administration, of that Brussels half, 71 per cent. would have to come from the British taxpayer. So the first part of the bill for the right hon. Gentleman's motion is £340 million of extra public expenditure.

The right hon. Gentleman complained about the changes to the over-30-months scheme. If we went back to the status quo, as he seemed to suggest, that would cost another £40 million minimum. He did not put a price on his demands on hill livestock compensatory allowances, but he mentioned a figure of £60 million, so we will add that to the total. That takes us to £440 million of additional public expenditure, which is the cost of the right hon. Gentleman's amendment. Where does he propose that should come from? Tax increases? Does he want it to be taken from other budget headings, such as health, education or training? He made no suggestion about that, because he knows that the whole proposal is so fraudulent as to be laughable. That is the cost of his menu without prices: with prices it is in excess of £400 million.

Mr. Jack: I have already supplied an answer to the question of hill livestock compensatory allowances. With great respect, the Minister has not read our motion. We asked him how he intends to respond to the calls from farmers, particularly hill farmers, on these issues. So far, all we have had is an accounting exercise. The Minister will not answer the questions that we posed.

Dr. Cunningham: It is a bit rich for a former Treasury Minister to call it an accounting exercise. Does he think that we do not have to keep the books? Is that what he proposes?

Mr. Jack *rose—*

Dr. Cunningham: I shall not give way again: I have given way three times already. I am not having any more of his long, boring, convoluted interventions thank you very much.

[Dr. Cunningham]

The right hon. Gentleman must face the fact that he is demanding that British taxpayers should, one way or another, produce a minimum of an additional £440 million to support the motion. There is no way that we can realistically provide anything like that sum of money.

Mr. Gummer: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: No, I shall not give way for the moment. We shall deal with these issues.

Mr. Gummer: The right hon. Gentleman is frit.

Dr. Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman flatters himself.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is not giving way.

Dr. Cunningham: The right hon. Member for Fylde suggested that I had failed to talk to farmers about HCLAs.

Mr. Jack: HLCAs.

Dr. Cunningham: HLCAs, that is right. I met Sir David Naish and his colleagues to discuss this subject just last week.

Mr. Jack: For English farmers.

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, and my Scottish colleagues met Scottish farmers, the Secretary of State for Wales has met farmers in Wales and the same will happen in Northern Ireland. When that round of consultation has finished, we shall discuss the outcome. The right hon. Gentleman's suggestion that we have already made up our minds about these matters is completely bogus: I have said no such thing.

As for agri-monetary compensation, I have told farmers exactly what I am telling the House now and what I told the Select Committee on Agriculture this morning. I am not persuaded that the case has been made. I have not said no, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested. I shall keep the matter under review, and I have until January next year for some of the potential compensation and even longer than that to make up my mind.

Mr. Gummer: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Will he help us on the question of the £200 million underspend? Does that underspend exist? If so, could he apply it? We are not asking him to say now whether he will apply it. Has that £200 million already been taken by the Treasury? If he could help the House, we would know whether or not he has the money.

Dr. Cunningham: No money from the existing budget has been taken by the Treasury. I shall find out whether the assertion of the right hon. Member for Fylde is true, and we can then consider it. I am not convinced that it is true, but we shall see.

I shall return to the speech that I was making before the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) intervened. The previous Government's scheme to encourage conversion to organic farming offered the lowest rates in the European Union. We are urgently studying the structure and rates of that aid scheme with a view to raising the profile and quantity of organic farming in Britain. However, organic farming is not the only way to bring environmental benefits, nor will it suit every farmer or every consumer. We have taken broader steps to protect and enhance the countryside. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are currently undertaking a joint review of countryside policy.

The right hon. Member for Fylde criticised us for not having produced a White Paper on the countryside. It took the Conservative Government 16 years to produce a White Paper, and he criticises us for not having produced one in six months. The criticism is absurd, and the right hon. Gentleman knows it. Like the road to hell, their White Paper was paved with good intentions but made no specific proposals that were acted on by the Conservative Government.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the environment. Surely it is most important for the rural environment to remain inhabited. Neither the Government nor the official Opposition have expressed concern about family farms and smallholdings, which are under great threat. Geraint Jones, a farmer, wrote to me and said—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Dr. Cunningham.

Dr. Cunningham: We know there are problems. I would be the first to acknowledge that there are pretty serious problems, because I represent hill farmers. The idea that we can resolve those problems within six months of taking office, or provide the resources on the scale that the right hon. Gentleman pretends is possible, is frankly absurd, and people know that. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) says, from a sedentary position, that we have made matters worse. During the election, we campaigned on a proposal to stay within the previous Government's spending policies. Conservative Members supported and voted for those spending policies, but now that they are in opposition, they criticise them. They pushed their spending proposals through the House of Commons. They supported them then, and within six months of losing office they are criticising them. The right hon. Gentleman's opportunism and that of his hon. Friends is transparent and naked in its vulnerability.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Like me, my right hon. Friend has hill farmers in his constituency. The previous Government's failure is shown by the amount of land that has gone out of production and by the number of farmers who have ceased to farm.

Dr. Cunningham: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I know that in some of the dales in my constituency, where there were once five or six farms, there are now one or two. People have left the land and others have bought the farms and amalgamated them

simply because, over years, people could not make even a subsistence living under the previous Government's policies.

We are committed to supporting the biodiversity action plans that have been drawn up for many of our important and threatened species and habitats. With our encouragement, flax processors have introduced a protocol that should end farmers ploughing up land of conservation value to gain the large subsidy available for that crop. We are looking at ways of strengthening the protection for hedges and sites of special scientific interest with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and her colleagues in the Department.

We have made major progress on better, more effective animal welfare policies in six months in office. On the problem of BSE and the beef ban, we have made more progress in six months in Brussels than the previous Government made in 18 months.

We are introducing a pilot arable stewardship scheme to enhance biodiversity in arable areas and particularly address the serious decline of many of our well-loved birds, such as the skylark. We have noted concerns about the protection of various areas of outstanding natural beauty and look forward to receiving advice in the spring from the Countryside Commission.

This ragbag of an Opposition motion and the speech of the right hon. Member for Fylde—a former Agriculture Minister and a former Treasury Minister—simply beggars belief. [HON. MEMBERS: "He is reading."] If hon. Members really want to know, it does not actually say that in front of me. The suggestion that, somehow, the Government are not concerned about the position of farmers is nonsense. Compensation is not without cost, as I pointed out. The compensation scheme available requires a 71 per cent. contribution from the Government and taxpayers.

Turning to the point by the right hon. Member for Fylde on the over-30-months scheme, I believe that farmers have had a reasonable amount of time to adapt to the changed circumstances brought about by BSE and the introduction of the scheme. When the changes were made, I met representatives of the National Farmers Union. We invited them to suggest alternative proposals. I said that, if they could come back to me with alternative proposals which suited them and the union's members better, I would be happy to try to persuade Brussels to accept them. The sad reality was that they were unable to reach any agreement on any set of proposals to substitute for the ones that came from Brussels in the first place.

On HLCAs, I would more than welcome, as I have said to the right hon. Member for Fylde, the Opposition's advice on how they think that we could continue with the £60 million provision which they made for one year only.

Mr. Jack: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Cunningham: I am not giving way any more. That provision for one year only was coincidentally in the year before a general election.

Mr. Jack *rose—*

Dr. Cunningham: I am not giving way any more.

Although we wish to help farmers whenever possible, the Government were elected with a clear commitment to remain within the previous Government's predetermined public expenditure totals, for which the right hon. Gentleman voted. Unlike the previous Tory Government, this Government will keep their promises.

I asked the right hon. Member for Fylde earlier, although he did not reply—

Mr. Jack *rose—*

Dr. Cunningham: No, I am not giving way again. It is clearly a waste of time to do so. The right hon. Gentleman did not suggest extra taxation or transferring resources from anywhere else. As I have said, he has tried to get through the debate without putting any price on his proposals.

The Conservative party's condemnation of the Government for not introducing

"policies to protect small village shops and rural post offices"

is an act of desperation rather than a coherent line of policy given its policies in that area, especially Post Office privatisation proposals. The Government will push ahead with our manifesto pledge for greater freedom for people to explore the countryside. Not only is it important to preserve and enhance the landscape and wildlife; it is important that everyone should be able to enjoy it. We are firm in that commitment but we are equally determined to respect the rights of those who live and work in the countryside. We will work closely with all those involved and shortly publish a consultation paper on the matter.

I have demonstrated the Government's commitment to rural communities. We have taken many issues forward in the past six months. The Government aim to create a healthy, sustainable rural economy. The development of an integrated approach, better use of resources and effective European policies can combine to help us create it. The previous Administration never even tried to do so on that basis.

With a new Labour Government, the prospects for our countryside and the people who live, work in and depend on it are better than ever. I urge the House to reject the fraudulent Tory motion and support the Government amendment.

8.35 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I should like to draw the attention of the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to the real situation in agriculture as seen in my constituency, which is a fragile one of uplands and difficult farming, where there are some of the most difficult conditions in the United Kingdom. What he has said in this debate will not bring one crumb of comfort to farmers in my constituency who fear for their livelihoods.

If farmers who fear for their livelihoods are forced to quit the land, enormous support of the landscape, the environment and wildlife will go with them. Finding an alternative means of supporting the land, keeping the landscape and enabling people to enjoy it will cost more than the maintenance of farmers on that land. They know about that countryside and that landscape.

There is a real crisis that affects the lifeblood of my constituency, which is typical of many in the uplands of the United Kingdom—whether in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales or large parts of England. Three elements are fuelling the crisis. Price cuts following revaluation

[Mr. David Curry]

have brought the dairy prices for a Milk Marque producer down to 20p, with whatever quality payments might be available.

Cuts in the over-30-months compensation scheme, especially to the weight limit, are bound to hit suckler herds, which are characteristic of uplands and difficult areas. Farmers there do not have a range of choice of breeds. A Charolais or Belgian Blue-based herd in my constituency suffers immediately from such a cut.

Cuts in beef prices have been disastrous. I was at the Craven auction mart yesterday—I am afraid that I shall mention it frequently. The following are yesterday's prices; what farmers are getting at the moment; the actual situation to within 24 hours of the present. Farmers in the Craven auction mart are talking not about biodiversity action plans but about the beef price. That is what matters to them.

For steers, farmers are getting 90p a kilo. Two years ago, it was 115p. Heifers fetch 97p a kilo, but two years ago they were sold for 135p a kilo. The best price for the most fashionable and desirable Belgian Blue is about 138p a kilo, yet the same beef was bringing in more than 200p a kilo two years ago.

Dr. John Cunningham: That was before BSE.

Mr. Curry: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I represent hill farmers. He represents hill farmers. I am concerned about their situation now, and appealing to him to do something about it. He understands it.

Dr. Cunningham: The right hon. Gentleman should not compare prices now with prices before the BSE crisis. That is just a cheat.

Mr. Curry: It does not seem a cheat to farmers. The prices affect their income, what goes into their bank balances, their collateral, what the bank manager has to judge. If the right hon. Gentleman told farmers at Craven auction mart that they should not compare prices because it is a cheat, it would not help their bank balances or their livelihoods.

There is a problem, and I would like to help the right hon. Gentleman to solve it. Plenty of cattle are still being sold at 80p a kilo. He mentioned that there might be a hill livestock compensatory allowance review. It certainly does not feel as if there is to be one to the farmers in my constituency.

For a dairy farmer, the combination of cuts in cull cow compensation and price cuts for heifers and bull calves means that the farm income for a 55 or 60-strong dairy herd, which is a typical size, especially in Wales, is £13,000 to £15,000 down on last year's profit. In the past few months, no fewer than 15 small dairy farmers in my constituency have sold their whole undertaking at the Craven auction mart. That is the extent of the haemorrhage affecting the dairy herd.

Of course, that option is not open to many hill farmers, because they are locked into the land and cannot get away so easily. They do not have quotas, as dairy farmers have, which are immediately marketable and, in fact, provide pensions for some of the older farmers. They depend on the HLCAs to the tune of 90 per cent. or more, and they have been hit by the cattle price and the sheep price.

I am sorry to keep coming back to the Craven mart, but the prices there represent the farmers' incomes, because it is their marketplace. Mule wether lambs were selling for £38 to £42 in August, but the same animals are now £34 to £35. That fall has happened in a matter of months, so the same problem is occurring even in the sheepmeat sector, which is normally regarded as having done well.

Upland farmers cannot walk out, so we see increasing poverty. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was right about one thing—people in the countryside work for very low wages—sometimes for what we would regard as pocket money. Poverty in the countryside is much less obvious than in the town, because the communities are more remote and it is therefore less easy to treat. The sheer levels of despair that are reached—the hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) is nodding, because he knows this is true—are very serious indeed. The Government can help.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) mentioned the green pound revaluation and the weight limits. On that subject, I wonder whether the Government have achieved savings on the suckler premium, because that has been affected by the revaluation. The suckler premium savings might enable the Minister to lift the weight limit on suckler herds only, which would be an enormous help, which could be targeted on some of the most vulnerable sectors.

The Government should conduct a proper HLCA review. The cost of doing nothing may be bearable in the short term, but in the long term the fabric of rural life and landscape—which we value and which the Minister says he values—is at risk from what is happening. That is not just a farmer's whinge. Everybody is used to epigrammatic remarks about farmers always being miserable, but the current problems go to the very heart of their livelihoods and of life in my constituency and other rural areas.

I can tell the Minister that the hills are bleeding, and, if the Government do nothing, the hills will soon be dying. That is not the only fear. People have fears about access, and the Government could do a service by tidying up the many untidy bits of legislation on access. It is not right for the diversion of a footpath to cost £10,000 and take seven years. There is a good case for tidying up the legislation and introducing voluntary access agreements with landowners.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key), I am concerned about the fate of the Rural Development Commission and the absorption of objective 5b into objective 2. Will the Government continue the single regeneration budget universally across the country, or pull it back to the cities? Not a word has been said on that by the relevant Department since the Government came to power. It appears to be one of the few matters that the Government are not reviewing at the moment.

I am concerned about local authority services. The Government claim to have helped education and health, but personal social services will face a crisis this year. That crisis will affect many elderly people living in residential homes in remote communities.

What will the Government do about planning? The Minister is a decent man, and he represents an upland constituency. I know that he understands the problems and would like to support his constituents. He knows, because

he talks to farmers and the other country people who come to see him and he goes about his constituency, that the problems are the same throughout the country.

We all accept the financial constraints on Governments—although the Government have had a Budget and the opportunity to change their priorities—but what matters is the livelihood of the people on whom we depend to maintain a certain sort of countryside and way of life. Those people are crucial to the countryside, and we want to preserve them. If the right hon. Gentleman does nothing, we will not succeed. If he is prepared to act, we can look forward to seeing succeeding generations in that precious and vital landscape that we all wish to enjoy.

8.43 pm

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I crave the indulgence of the House, because I wish to speak on another aspect of the rural economy, which has nothing to do with farming. I speak with reasonable authority, because I was a professional geologist when I had a proper job. I emphasise at the beginning that more than 100,000 people are involved in the minerals extraction industry in this country, much of which is based in rural areas and which contributes enormously to the rural economy.

Britain is underlain by rocks of an extraordinarily rich variety. Those minerals have been used since pre-history in every facet of this island's social and commercial life. Boxgrove man knapped flints from chalk cliffs 500,000 years ago; Roman colonists obtained gold, silver and lead from Cornubia; Wealden iron made the guns that defeated the Spanish armada; and our coal resources fuelled the industrial revolution. That extraordinary revolution was built on the mineral wealth of this country. It provided the raw materials for the chemical industry, the sand and gravel and limestone for concrete, and the oil and gas that now drives most of our modern transportation system.

Despite the demonstrable value of the minerals industry to the national economy, the widespread public perception is of an industry that has squandered the earth's resources, despoiled the landscape and polluted the environment. I say to the Government, as I would have said to the previous Government, that they cannot base a policy on the opinions of the last pressure group that Ministers spoke to. We need a properly planned minerals policy. I speak not on behalf of the industry, but on behalf of the more than 100,000 people who are involved in the industry, many in rural areas where there is no other option for work.

Apart from the jobs and prospects in rural communities, the industry is enormously valuable to the country. The total value of minerals production in the United Kingdom is some £17 billion a year, including industrial minerals such as fluorspar, barytes, salt, potash, fuller's earth and special clays, and construction minerals such as crushed rock, national aggregates, gypsum and common clay. Many hon. Members have quarries and works in their constituencies that extract those vital minerals for our economy.

Mineral production in Britain is now dominated by oil, followed by coal, but other vital non-metallic minerals are very important, including crushed rock, limestone, sand and gravel. They are essential to our construction industry and in the development of our cities, which are probably the greatest despoilers of the environment, especially when the Government allow intrusion into the green belt.

Britain is a major minerals producer on a world scale. More than 80,000 people are employed directly by the industry, and many are employed, especially in the rural communities, in transporting the minerals to the consumer through heavy road vehicles and rail freight haulage. In addition, much of the revenue generated and derived from mining and quarries supports secondary industries in their areas, which often have few alternative sources of employment.

Negative perceptions of the industry are often trotted out by certain pressure groups. The first is that it squanders the earth's resources. That is simply not true. The record of mineral production through time shows clearly that, while individual mineral deposits can be worked out, known reserves have increased with time.

The second charge levelled at the industry is that it despoils landscapes. That also is not true. The industry may be an unwelcome neighbour in some areas—particularly for people who have come from the city to live in the country. They may not want to see any development of the rural economy, but, on the other hand, most people who live in rural communities welcome this way of earning a living outside agriculture.

An unavoidable fact at the heart of this debate which needs to be tackled by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is that Britain is a small and crowded island with many different demands for land use. The limits of free market principles and deregulation, which were the wont of the Tory party when it was in power, need to be closely addressed.

Having listened to the shadow spokesman, the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), I must say that I was amazed by his attitude and his calls for Government intervention—this is the only industry in which the Conservatives want the Government to play a part. Certainly, when the Conservatives were decimating British industry, I wished that they had interfered positively.

Planning decisions are desperately important, but they must be balanced with land use and the reconciliation between local desires and the national interest when an application is called in by a Department and examined at a public inquiry. The effect of minerals operation on the local environment in an aesthetic sense has to be balanced against the value to the local economy and whether the mineral is vital and is not available elsewhere.

It is important to recognise that aggregates extraction takes up only a minute area of the British landscape—something like 0.3 per cent. Oddly enough, the figure is declining rapidly, because the process of rehabilitation currently exceeds the present extraction rate. After mineral planning guidance 6 in 1994, the then Government were positive and said that there ought to be a rundown of primary extraction and greater use of recycling material.

There are some who say that MPG6 did not go far enough, and they would like to see the closing of limestone quarries and gravel workings, for example. They say that, if we cut the road building programme, it would reduce the demand for road stone.

The important thing to remember is that road building under the Conservatives was cut by such a degree that, in England, only one national scheme was started in 1995-96, and there is a huge backlog of maintenance

[Mr. Allan Rogers]

need. If no new roads were constructed by 2010, the demand for primary aggregates would be likely to increase by about 25 per cent.

I mention that because it is important to remember that 80 per cent. of the demand for primary aggregates leads not to road construction but to improvements in housing, schools, hospitals, railways, factories, inner cities, recreational facilities and amenities, sewage treatment works and a host of other essential uses. That is a positive contribution by the countryside economy to those who live in urban areas.

There is a conflict between landscape and the use of the countryside in this positive sense. But this must be balanced, and it can be balanced only by the Government adopting a constructive policy on mineral extraction. It is right for the industry to seek to create wealth from our natural resources, and it is equally right that neighbours should be entitled to object to activities which impinge—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

8.53 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am a last minute stand-in for my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) who is undertaking duties in the Standards and Privileges Committee. Any shafts of wisdom in the next few minutes come from me, while anything of a more prosaic nature comes from my hon. Friend's script.

I know that the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) has had to leave the Chamber for another engagement. I have made my apologies to him, because I must congratulate him on his speech and thank him not only for his contribution to tonight's debate, but for the way in which he has suggested how much better the debate would have been if he were still on the Conservative Front Bench. All of us who represent hill farmers and less-favoured areas know that the right hon. Gentleman sincerely believes that we can work together to help them. That is in sharp contrast to the new Conservative spokesman, the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Jack), who seemed to be suffering from the most extraordinary case of amnesia.

The countryside is under siege—we all know that. What is extraordinary about the motion is that, for some incredible reason, Conservative Members seem to think that that siege started on 2 May. That is patently ridiculous. How they have the nerve to table the motion, I do not understand. To his credit, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon did not speak in those terms, but instead spoke about trying to help those who have been hardest hit by many years in which hill farmers have been decimated by Government policies. Many in those communities would have been more impressed by the speech by the right hon. Gentleman than by the absurd attack by the right hon. Member for Fylde.

The countryside is under siege because of successive policies over a long period by urban-minded Governments from both sides, and we would do well to recognise that. Time after time in this House, Liberal Democrats have stood up for hill farmers, and we have had support from hon. Members from all parties. Indeed, some notable Labour Members have supported us on those occasions. I hope that we will have their support in a few weeks' time.

I take the Minister's point that the review of HLCAs has not yet taken place and that he has not come to a conclusion. We shall hold him to that, and we expect him to respond to the facts being put before him, not just by the farming unions but by the Country Landowners Association and the Hill Farming Initiative.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): Does my hon. Friend welcome the Minister's assurance that no decision has been made yet about HLCAs? I represent an area that is not only less favoured but severely disadvantaged and if our hill farmers do not receive positive help in the near future, many will go out of business.

Mr. Tyler: That is the case in many less-favoured areas. We look to the Minister to live up to the impression that his predecessors gave when in opposition, that they would be the hill farmers' champions.

The Conservatives have a miserable record in that respect: they cut, cut and cut again, even when the figures showed that, merely to compensate for reductions in income, which is what the hill livestock compensatory allowance is all about, payments would have been increased. We led the charge year after year—we shall do so again this year—and we look to the Government to live up to promises made in opposition.

Hill Farming Initiative estimates that, in this twelvemonth, there will be a cut of one fifth, on top of the previous cuts in incomes. We are determined to restore the real level of the HLCA to what it was in 1992, and we expect the Labour party to come with us.

The green pound revaluation has been mentioned several times and the figure is clearly considerable. The Minister rightly says that not all the money will come from Brussels, but a substantial sum can come from Brussels and is sitting there waiting for us. If we do not pick it up, our competitor countries in the European Union will use it to put their farmers in a better competitive position than ours. Every day that goes by with our Minister failing to pick up what is rightly ours gives British taxpayers' money to our competitors, making the famous level playing field even less level.

The same goes for the cut in the over-30-months scheme payments. I find it extraordinary that the right hon. Member for Fylde had nothing more to say about BSE. It is incredible. After the 18 months of dither, delay and shambles—as the farmers kept saying—over BSE, it is extraordinary that a Conservative spokesman can say that increasing OTMS payments is all that needs to be done to help the livestock sector and beef producers in particular.

There is a major problem with the weight system, and farmers in the lowland areas, where animals are fed on grass, will be especially disadvantaged—that will feed through the entire livestock sector—but to alter that will not be enough.

The Minister recently said to my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West that he is actively considering a full-scale inquiry into what went wrong with BSE. I hope that there will soon be an announcement about that, because it is about time that we exposed the 18 months of confusion caused by the

Conservative Government and their 10 years of mismanagement of BSE. On several occasions in the previous Parliament, I pressed Ministers to come clean, but they failed to do so. I hope that we shall now get the full-scale inquiry that the farming community deserves, so that we can identify what went wrong and ensure that it does not happen again.

The pressing issue of the BSE crisis is not the export ban but the failure to act effectively and vigorously to ensure that imports are of the same standard that we insist on from our own producers. The Minister announced a welcome initiative in the summer when he told us that he would introduce restrictions to ensure that products imported from other European Union countries, and countries outside the EU, were monitored to the high standards that we insist on in this country. We understand why the previous Government were only too happy to let in cheap imports for their friends in food processing and supermarket chains, but there is no excuse for the present Government not to act.

The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon mentioned prices. Prices in the market are affected far more by those imports than by the export ban. Of course we want to get rid of the export ban, but it would be a real start if we achieved parity throughout the European Union in controls, monitoring, restrictions and effective steps to ensure that no BSE-affected meat could ever again reach consumers in this country. It is a scandal that imports are allowed in from countries that have declared instances of BSE and are not operating on a level playing field.

I understand that the Under–Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), will respond more fully on the general issue of development and jobs. I regret deeply the threat to the Rural Development Commission, which will have an extremely important role, regardless of whether there are regional development agencies. The Government, like the previous Government, seem not to understand that there are rural environmental considerations that are completely separate from the urbanisation that has so often caused such difficulty.

That is also true, for example, with the jobseeker's allowance. All of us who represent rural constituencies must know that young people have great difficulty in meeting the constraints of the allowance because of transport problems but, as I understand it, the Government have made no attempt to adjust what they inherited from their predecessors and to adapt the requirements to the needs of rural communities.

The same is true of rural training, help for rural businesses, and advice on premises and finance. Jobs in rural areas are invariably less well paid, often give less choice, and are difficult to plan for in the new environment that the Government have inherited and seem not to be prepared to change.

Clearly, there needs to be a better balance in planning. In recent months, we have seen the Government's failure to come forward with a national plan to cope with the anticipated increase in households.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Does my hon. Friend agree that it was unfortunate that Ministers said that rural land was up for grabs? Does he agree that the matter of 4.4 million homes needs to be treated with great sensitivity and in consultation with the rural and urban communities that will be affected by that massive development?

Mr. Tyler: I agree very much with my hon. Friend and I hope that the Under-Secretary will examine that point when she replies.

The Government face a major problem, but it is a problem of their own making. In an admirable confession a few minutes ago, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that he had had to adopt the previous Government's spending restrictions. Who said that he had to adopt them? [HON. MEMBERS: "The electors."] The electors said nothing of the sort. Did the electorate say that the new Government had to adopt those expenditure limits for two years? Of course they did not. What bunkum! Every councillor in the country knows that that is not true. The suggestion that the Minister had to adopt the expenditure constraints is ludicrous. By cloning the Tory Budget, the Minister and his Cabinet colleagues have adopted a straitjacket in agriculture as in so many other areas of public policy.

The Minister referred to the common agricultural policy reform programme. Clearly, far too much of his predecessor's menu has, again, been swallowed hook, line and sinker. We must achieve some subsidiarity over issues such as modulation so that we can have more local and regional control over the way in which they operate. It would be fatal for the Government to go into negotiations on a take-it-or-leave-it basis and to find themselves landed with modulation at European level. That would be absurd and would not fit the circumstances in the United Kingdom.

I acknowledge that the Government are looking positively at ways in which European funding arrangements can be adjusted to suit our needs. I hope that that is true of the new objective 2 status areas. There is, however, a real problem about which those of us in 5b areas already know. I refer to the absurd red tape, the maladministration and the slow administration of existing funding in 5b areas.

We shall find that, at the end of the full period of 5b status, we have taken up about 50 per cent. of the money available to us from British taxpayers as well as other taxpayers. My colleague the Member of the European Parliament for Cornwall and Plymouth West has calculated that we have got only about a quarter of what we deserve and can draw down from Brussels, although we are already halfway through the programme. If that happens again with objective 2, the Treasury may save a few million pounds, but little will be done to help the rural communities for which the programme is intended. It is vital that we speed up the process. If we do not, the whole programme will work to the advantage of our competitors in Europe and will do little to help us.

It is sometimes said that there is a conflict between environmental policies and those designed to help employment in rural areas. I do not believe that that is true. The work being done by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is particularly helpful in that respect because it demonstrates that, in agriculture and other country activities, there is a real chance to improve employment by the use of more explicit environmental programmes. The society says:

"RSPB believes that maintaining wildlife is entirely compatible with better living standards for rural communities: a healthy countryside and strong local communities go hand in hand.

The needs of wildlife and their habitat are often regarded as an obstacle to rural development. What has become clear in our research on rural issues, is that the environment is a foundation stone for a healthy thriving rural community."

Nowhere more so than in the hills.

The right hon. Member for Fylde had somewhat more notice to prepare his speech than did I. It was not much more time but I find it mind-boggling, breathless cheek that he could describe the present dispensation on HLCAs as tawdry. Where was he for the past five years when his Government colleagues cut and cut and cut again? We then had a bit of staggering amnesia when he talked about the treatment of beef farmers. Where was he last year when they were hammering on the doors of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food calling for the resignation of the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg)? Presumably, like most of the ostriches in the Treasury, he had his head in the sand.

Farmers have longer memories. They will not forget or forgive the Conservatives playing partisan politics this evening. We should have heard from their spokesman a speech along the lines of that of the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon, who discussed the practical concerns of the countryside. If we had had more of that from the Conservatives, not only the House but the farming community would hold them in more respect.

9.10 pm

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): For one and a half hours of a three-hour debate to be taken up by the three Front-Bench spokesman is unacceptable, and an abuse of those of us on the Back Benches who have been trying to get in. Having said that, I was much diverted by the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who represents probably the flattest constituency in England, lecturing my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), who represents probably the most mountainous, on the problems of hill farming.

In the last Parliament, it was irritating to be told over and again by the Conservative Government that they represented rural interests about which the Opposition parties knew nothing. The right hon. Member for Fylde did not mention the document that the Labour party produced in the lead-up to the general election, "A Working Countryside", which ranged across the whole gamut of rural life and showed how the quality of life in rural areas such as mine depends not only on farming incomes, important though they are, but on the health service, transport systems, social services and education. The countryside is not set in aspic, as the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) once memorably said, but is part of a continuum with urban areas. There is no simple division between country people and urban people. They have different problems but they are not different species, as the Tories like to pretend. They often talk as if towns were surrounded by mediaeval walls and the people in them never went outside.

The debate has mainly been about farming, but I should like to make some disparate points, with which I hope my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will be able to deal at some point. I am glad that, with her wide brief, she is responding to this debate.

The countryside is under siege. An important point made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) must be emphasised. We are told that we need an extra 4.4 million homes. I do not believe that such a quantity is needed, but that figure was adopted by the previous Government, and, as far as I know, is accepted by the present Government as an assumption. Please let that not involve huge developments in our villages. My constituency, for example, includes the beautiful village of Newburgh, where there was an attempt to bribe the community and the councils into building nearly 400 houses in a village that did not have so many to start with in return for a bypass provided by the developer. It was a great temptation for the village because it is pounded to pieces by traffic.

Brown land and the land surrounding new towns such as Skelmersdale should be the first areas to be considered for new housing and other building development. In north Wales, for example, the only piece of prime agricultural land is about to have factories built on it. It is currently farmed by one of my constituents. Right next to it are hundreds of acres of brown land in the form of the old steelworks which will not be developed. That is plainly crazy. The Country Landowners Association was quite correct in its briefing paper on the need to take action to secure developers from future claims and to give further help in the clean-up of brown land and land that might be contaminated. We cannot have the green belt, which occupies most of my constituency, plundered by developers any longer.

I welcome the Government's plans to reduce investment in major roads and motorways, but small bypasses to deal with terrible bottlenecks in villages and small towns still have to be considered. All too often, ancient and beautiful old towns such as Burscough, Newburgh and Parbold in my constituency are being pounded to pieces.

There are also problems with public transport. There are enormous problems with isolation in rural areas, particularly for elderly people and those who do not possess cars. Under the Conservative Government my part of the world experienced the collapse of rural bus services almost into oblivion and the seemingly deliberate rundown of rural rail services. We need more halts and more stations, but the few that are being provided, such as that at Euxton in Lancashire, are not being provided by the railway companies: it is the county councils that have to find the money. We need more regular trains, later trains and trains on Sundays to enable people to communicate. The same applies to bus services. There is a great deal of scope for the integration of planning so that any domestic development in rural areas is concentrated around railway stations to encourage both the use of the station and less use of private cars.

Another completely separate problem in west Lancashire, part of Fylde and certainly part of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) is the collapse of moss roads that were built over peat. Over the years, the peat has dried out, shrunk and collapsed, so the roads are collapsing. The county councils cannot—no highway authority could—fund the rebuilding of that elaborate road network, and, certainly since I have been involved in the county council and then in Parliament, there has been no Government help whatever to tackle the problem of moss roads. As farm vehicles get bigger and heavier, the problem becomes worse.

I could continue for hours, but as time is short I shall simply flag up the uglification of parts of our countryside and the plethora of road signs. Why do local authorities seem to require a separate post for every sign instead of putting them all on the same post? Why are signs getting bigger? Why are we providing public money to build wind turbines in environmentally sensitive areas such as Kirby moor in south Cumbria and, as the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) knows better than anyone, on Longridge fell? We have to tackle those idiotic planning monstrosities in our countryside.

Over the past 18 years many economic calamities have hit our villages and rural areas. They include the blow suffered by rural sub-post offices—because of some idiocy by the Government at the time—from which many have never recovered.

There are also tremendous problems with village schools. As people increasingly drive their children to schools in nearby towns, small village schools, which are usually the centre of the community, start falling to bits. The same problem affects village pubs, which are also centres of community life. They are hit by supermarket competition and by beer smuggling and the problems that arise from it.

It would be churlish not to mention that there has been some attempt to help village shops and sub-post offices through rate relief and grants from the Rural Development Commission to some small shops in select parts of the country. However, the full implications of almost every policy that applies to rural areas—or, indeed, every policy—should be put through a rural filter and through an environmental filter. That is what "A Working Countryside" sought to prefigure and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport deserve great credit for that document and the new direction it gave to Labour party policy.

The great advantage of urban living is the convenience of facilities provided to meet the needs of the critical mass available there. The great advantages of rural living are better air, relative quiet, relative isolation and so on; the downside is sparsity of services. The palliative—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

9.20 pm

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): I would go along with much of what was said by the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall), especially his remarks about the need to protect the countryside from large-scale incursions of new housing. I wish that the Minister for London and Construction were here, because this is one of the few areas of environmental affairs where the present Government have departed significantly from the position that obtained before. The Minister said that we were naive to say that those 4.5 million houses could be built on brown land. Despite his attacking me for naivety, I am happy to be as naive as the Round Table on Sustainable Development and the Council for the Protection of Rural England in saying that we should be siting at least 75 per cent. of those new homes on brown land. I should like us to go further than that.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: No, I have only 10 minutes.

I should like to go further than that because it is good for the countryside and for the town to build on brown land. Indeed, I do not see how we can have a sensible regeneration policy for our urban areas if we allow people to take the easy option of building on green-field—especially green-belt—sites.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) is not here to explain why, at the time when she has been lucky to be able to buy a new house for herself, others are now facing the destruction of their rural area because Hertfordshire county council has declared by one vote—a vote over the Conservative minority—that it will release 800 acres of green-belt land between Stevenage and Hemel Hempstead, which are hardly kept apart at the moment, so that many new homes will be built on that land. Such decisions are damaging to our cities and to the countryside and I am sorry that the Government have decided to turn their backs on the policy that formerly obtained, which was that the green belt would not be damaged in that way.

I can recall only one occasion when I was Secretary of State when I gave permission for a substantial development in the green belt. People knew, therefore, that there was no point in asking for permission, so they had to get on with developing brown land. I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will dissociate herself from the attacks on the protection of the green belt that we have heard from the Minister for London and Construction, who should look far more carefully at his policy if he is to be in tune with what I understand Government policy to be.

I also agree with the hon. Member for West Lancashire about the road signs. The only contribution made by the Liberal Democrat party in Suffolk was to put up a large number of signs. One entered a small village to be greeted by a great yellow sign saying "Peasenhall" and underneath it said, "Village", in case one did not know it was a village and might think that it was a combine harvester. The Liberal Democrats may have felt that they needed to tell people that it was a village because most of them were not country people representing the countryside but needed to be told about it. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) did himself no good at all with his comments about my right hon. Friend—

Mr. Tyler: Which one?

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well which right hon. Friend I am referring to. He knows as well as I do that Liberal Democrat party policy on the countryside depends entirely on the constituency—*[Interruption.]* We all know that, and Labour Members know that it is true. Indeed, it does not even change from constituency to constituency; it changes from ward to ward. Where there is a vote to be garnered, a policy can be changed. If the vote of somebody who thinks differently can be gained, the principles can be changed, for nobody will notice. Comparisons seat by seat show perfectly well where the Liberal Democrats stand: where they think that they might win a vote. That is the only principle that has ever obtained in the Liberal Democrat party.

It is therefore reasonable to ask the Labour party, now that we have heard the less than eloquent speech by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, why it has

[Mr. Gummer]

not yet explained to the House how, in times of such difficulties with money, it was possible to find £1 million to re-do the Agriculture Minister's offices. That sum might have been spent better on farming, but I do not know from which part of the budget it was taken. It was certainly not in the Red Book; nor was it part of the tight collar of which he spoke in respect of the previous Government. However, it is unusual for an Agriculture Minister who has been in position for six months not to know whether any money was left over from the sheep annual premium. He must be the first Agriculture Minister for many years not to have such a figure at his fingertips.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley) *rose—*

Mr. Gummer: I should tell the hon. Gentleman who is rushing to the Minister's aid that I was not about to say something rude. I was simply going to mention why previous Agriculture Ministers always had that figure at their fingertips. I knew that if I did not have it, the Treasury would have pinched it and I wanted to defend it against the Treasury. I always knew the figure because the Treasury was always out for any little "candle ends", as it would say. I am worried that, if the current Agriculture Minister does not know the amount, it has probably gone already because the Treasury will have got its sticky fingers in there very rapidly.

Mr. Morley: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gummer: No, I really should not give way because I promised to be brief. There will be plenty of time for summing up.

I understand that £200 million is available and I hope that the Agriculture Minister will sort that matter out rapidly. I hope that he will also look at the fact that the last Government put in train an operation that would have given special help to rural post offices and small shops in villages with only one shop. That would not have been affected by the regulations about how much money was available because we were going to use the same totality but put a little more into the countryside by helping those shops. We have heard nothing of that from the Labour party. There was silence when Labour Members were asked about it and I want to know where they stand. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will doubtless be able to tell us.

We then had a story about how the Government would reform the common agricultural policy, a matter of which I have some experience. I was unhappy about the Agriculture Minister's statement, which said that the Government wanted to take the money that was now used for production support and use it for the environment. I am very much in favour of that but did not like the sentence, which was dangerous. He said that "some" of the money "could" be used to help "targeted" environmental purposes. I do not like that at all. Some of it? Perhaps, but how much? Does "could" mean "will", or "only if we can get away with it"? Most people in rural areas listening to the Agriculture Minister will probably say that he is not standing up for them. They will say to themselves, "He does not know whether he has any money in his back pocket; he is not on top of the job; he obviously does not know the figures."

People will also say to themselves that the Minister lacks the fire to battle in the European Union. No one could be more enthusiastic about our place in the European Union than I am, but undoubtedly, because one believes in it one must battle there and fight for Britain. If the right hon. Gentleman is woolly about the funds that could be used to target, he will not get tuppence, or even a penny. He does not have a chance. He must go and fight.

I have heard from the Labour party no evidence of a desire to fight for the rural areas. I have heard no fire from Labour. Until we have a Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who believes in them, feels for them and fights for them, we shall not have a hope in the rural areas.

9.29 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): Because of the shortage of time allocated to me, I shall concentrate on the planning issue, following the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who talks a lot about planning and about brown-field development. The problem is that when he was Secretary of State for the Environment, he did not take the opportunity to question the figure of 4.4 million households that was quoted, and he made no proposals on how brown-field sites might be pressed into use. Now we are confronted with a very difficult problem, which we shall in due course debate and study to search for solutions.

I was intrigued that, although the word "planning" appears in the Opposition motion, the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) mentioned it only superficially. That shows the depth of the Conservatives' concern about that key issue, which was taken up subsequently. Obviously, it is not as important in some respects as agriculture, but we must consider how it fits into the rural economy.

I, for one, will say that I question the numbers. I question the need for 4.4 million new households and I wish and hope that there will be a debate on the subject. My criticism is based on two presumptions.

First, it is not good enough to say that the figures for the previous 20 years will be replicated during the next 20 years. Major sociological changes are taking place, which need to be reflected in the forecasts. Secondly, in my area, much of the requirement is based on migration and I am pleased that, with colleagues, I have been able to do research to show that migration, which is the driving force, is slowing down. Unfortunately, that is not reflected in the figures.

I would ask this of the Government—and the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal, when he is listening: if and when this debate is taken up, I hope that we can get some genuine understanding of what the numbers mean and especially the implications of those numbers. I am one of the 170 Labour Members mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who represent a truly rural area, and my area is under development pressure. Those development pressures cannot be hidden from or escaped from; they must be dealt with rationally. Development must take place when it is needed and according to rules that are open and understood—not at the whim of developers.

The right hon. Member for Fylde failed to mention rural poverty—an issue that many hon. Members representing rural constituencies know too well from our surgeries, our mailbags and discussions with individual constituents.

It would be nice to think that hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench would feel guilt for what they did in the past 18 years. We have heard listed the policies that have increased poverty instead of reducing it: the deregulation of buses, the continuing decline in the number of shops and other services in the rurality, the imposition of signing on through jobseeker's allowance, which the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) mentioned. The list goes on and on. It would be nice to see some remorse from Conservative Front Benchers. They have offered no solutions; they have not mentioned poverty or attempted to address the root cause of the problem by advancing ideas to deal with it. Poverty exists in our rural areas as well as in our inner cities, and we must introduce policies that address that terrible problem.

I am pleased, even at this late stage, to say that the Government will introduce a coherent platform not just on agriculture and rural areas, but on the whole development issue. The Government will deal with the saddest issue of all: rural poverty. I hope that all hon. Members have some understanding of how those matters can, and should, be addressed.

9.35 pm

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): This has been a very significant debate that has raised many issues of enormous importance to the rural community. However, it has also been a desperately sad debate as it has exposed with brutal clarity the truth about Labour's attitude to the countryside. That attitude is founded on ignorance, riddled with prejudice, expressed without sympathy and is bordering on outright hostility. Labour's total lack of understanding of the needs and aspirations of the men, women and children who live in the countryside is nothing less than frightening.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to respond to all the points raised in the debate. However, I gladly pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry), whose expertise on the subjects studied during many years of service at both MAFF and the Department of the Environment was clear from his speech. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) struggled—as he and his colleagues usually do now—with the dilemma of whether to attack the Government or the Opposition. As a result, most of his punches missed their targets.

I shall focus on four issues, the first of which is planning. On Radio 4 last week, the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), said:

"The green belt is up for grabs".

They are chilling words, but we cannot say that we were not warned. It is no use the Minister shaking her head: that is what the hon. Gentleman said live on Radio 4. We were warned last August by the Deputy Prime Minister, who overturned the recommendation of an independent planning inspector and approved the industrial development of a 140-acre site in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler). Incidentally, that site was owned by the Labour-controlled Birmingham city council—not that I am suggesting that that was a factor in the Deputy Prime Minister's thinking.

When the Minister replies to the debate, will she repudiate the extraordinary comments of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Central? Will she confirm categorically, without qualification, that the rigorous protection of the green belt—which was a cornerstone of planning policy under the Conservative Government—will be maintained without any relaxation? Is she aware that if she refuses to give that assurance to the House today alarm will spread through millions of people, the quality of whose lives has been enhanced immeasurably by the green belt? They know—even if the Minister and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Central do not—how eagerly developers will eye up the countryside that was protected previously by Conservative policy.

A wider planning issue is where the new homes will be built. I accept that there is a debate about how many there will be. Perhaps we shall not need 4.4 million new houses in the end, but we shall still need quite a lot. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) question the 4.4 million figure as he attempted to clothe himself in some kind of green mantle. I am obliged to my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) for reminding me that the hon. Gentleman's remarks would be better addressed to the Labour-controlled local council in Stroud, which is proposing to despoil large areas of his constituency.

The Round Table on Sustainable Development recommended that 75 per cent. of those new homes should be built on sites that had been previously developed. At present, the country is achieving a figure of 50 per cent. Contrary to the comments made by the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall), the previous Government were ready to raise that target. Indeed, I have no doubt that the consultation document that they published earlier this year was the prelude to a significant increase in the target.

The question now is what the Labour Government will do. Will they set a higher target for the proportions of homes that should be built on previously developed sites? If they fail to do so, and if they weaken the existing controls over the development of green-field sites, their decision will cause dismay in the countryside.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal rightly pointed out, it is not just the countryside that suffers when such development takes place in green-field sites; the inner cities suffer as well, because allowing new homes in the countryside leads to an exodus of the very people whom the inner cities need if the process of regeneration, in which the Conservative Government played such a distinguished part, is to continue.

I shall deal with one of the Government's socialist proposals. It was referred to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack)—the right to roam. This trespassers' charter sits ill with new Labour's proclaimed agenda. I am not surprised that it has few champions. Apparently they include that well-known specimen of new Labour, the Minister for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher).

Will the Minister confirm, when she winds up, that the consultation paper on the right to roam has not appeared because her Department's proposals have run into trouble elsewhere in Whitehall? Does she recognise that the right to roam is potentially an extremely dangerous threat to the cause of conservation and the environment in many parts of the country and could destroy many previously undisturbed and valuable habitats?

Mr. David Taylor (North–West Leicestershire): Will the hon. Gentleman condemn with me the action of

[Mr. David Taylor]

absentee landowners, such as the Garendon estate in north-west Leicestershire, which for decades deny public access to wild, beautiful, lonely, unfarmed places on the ground that it would damage those places and yet the moment mineral operators want to come and quarry they welcome them with open arms and open wallets? In those circumstances, is not profit being given a higher priority than preservation, and contamination more common than conservation?

Mr. Yeo: I am sorry that I gave way. I understand that the family concerned has a distinguished record of conservation and far from being an absentee landlord is resident in the constituency of one of my hon. Friends.

I suggest that instead of publishing the right to roam consultation paper the Government should abandon their policy and devote the resources to encouraging the voluntary agreements that have been so successful in extending access in the past few years.

On resources, the Minister has a chance this evening to allay the fears that the Government may tamper with the formula on the revenue support grant to take cash away from rural councils. Any caving in by the Labour Government to unjustified demands from their allies in the towns for extra money at the expense of the rural community will not pass unchallenged. Will the Minister confirm that the countryside will be no less favourably treated by Labour when the revenue support grant is announced next month than it has been in the past?

My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) mentioned the Rural Development Commission. Will the Minister confirm that the commission's budget will not be plundered and that it will be fully protected? Does she recognise that the Rural Development Commission's rural regeneration work, which accounts for £22 million of its spending, is not a suitable source from which to take away resources and give them to the regional development agencies, whose focus is inevitably likely to be more urban? Perhaps the Minister will tell the House what the regional development agencies will contribute to the countryside.

On accountability, I was dismayed to learn that the Government are abandoning their predecessor's tradition of publishing an annual update of the White Paper "Rural England". Is the refusal to continue to monitor the widely welcomed initiatives in the 1995 White Paper because the Government do not intend to continue with the policies contained within it, or is it simply that despite all the rhetoric about open government Labour is terrified of further scrutiny of its failure to serve the countryside? Is it that the Government know full well that by publishing regular updates of the White Paper they would expose the cuts in resources that they are planning and the consequences of those cuts?

The House has learnt today what many outside have begun to suspect, and that is that the Labour Government, with their urban-based majority—*[Interruption.]*—neither understand nor care about the countryside. The Prime Minister's claim that Labour is governing Britain in the interests of all the people is nothing more than a hollow sham. I commend the motion to the House.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Angela Eagle): It is always a pleasure to listen to the rants of the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), and we had a vintage performance tonight. I shall get round to answering some of his questions in due course. Initially, I shall deal with the rather virtual reality view of politics that Conservative Members seem to be propounding. It is a myth, and it is perpetuated with increasing desperation by the Conservative party, that Labour does not represent the interests of the countryside. The right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) was at it in *Farmers Weekly* recently when he said that we, Labour, did not represent those interests. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) has similarly ranted.

Following the general election, wherever the Conservative party has representation the Tories do not represent the countryside. Labour has 170 county constituencies while the Conservatives hold 135 and the Liberal Democrats 32. Labour now represents more county constituencies than both Opposition parties put together. In the general election, Labour enjoyed a national swing of 10.7 per cent., which was almost equalled in county constituencies with a swing of 10.4 per cent.

I shall not bore the House by going through the swings against Conservative Members who have contributed to the debate, all purporting to represent the countryside. Suffice it to say that on 1 May the countryside turned against the Conservative party in the same way as urban areas. The rump that the Tory party parades as an outdated caricature of town versus country can do only damage to the countryside while Labour is the one-nation party. It is Labour which seeks to unite the country and to create partnerships for progress. The Conservatives seek to divide the country in an attempt to set one part of it against the other. Before we take any more pious lectures from Conservatives about the needs of the countryside, it would be wise to remember the legacy that they left us to struggle with after 18 years of their stewardship of rural areas.

What was that legacy? I shall pluck a few examples out of the air to give the House the flavour of it. Between 1979 and 1996, there was a 144 per cent. increase in crime in the English and Welsh shire counties. There was a 29 per cent. cut in bus journeys after deregulation and 75 per cent. of rural parishes now have no daily bus services.

The Conservatives tolerated low pay and failed in their attempt to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board—a proposal that was opposed by everyone but the free market zealots in their own ranks. There are plenty more examples—I could go on.

There was the BSE fiasco, which devastated many rural communities, put public health at risk and cost the country billions of pounds. It was a Tory legacy. That debacle was almost as awful as the poll tax, which helped a few large landowners in the other place but caused massive hardship in our rural communities.

It is no wonder that the Tories lost so much support in the countryside on 1 May. It is no wonder that the swings against them in the rural areas were nearly 10.5 per cent. It is no wonder that they do not represent so much as a tree or a blade of grass in Scotland and Wales.

The people gave them their verdict on 1 May, after 18 years of Conservative stewardship in our rural areas, and it was a damning verdict.

I will now deal with specific points that were made in the debate. *[Interruption.]* I gave up some of my time so that Opposition Members could make their speeches.

The idea that somehow the Rural Development Commission has no future was raised by several right hon. and hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon and the hon. Member for South Suffolk. Ministers have fully discussed the rural role of the regional development agencies with Lord Shuttleworth, who is chairman of the Rural Development Commission. I can assure the House that the commission's views will be given due weight when the Government consider the role of RDAs. Decisions on this will be announced when the White Paper is published later in the year.

I also assure any hon. Members who may be worried about this that the RDAs will not be urban based. They will have a remit to look after the economic good of the entire areas that they cover—not just urban areas but rural areas. That will be central to their reason for existing.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) mentioned a possible inquiry into the BSE legacy. That is under active consideration. I hope that my assurances about the RDC and its future satisfy his worries.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) and the hon. Members for South Suffolk and for North Cornwall mentioned household growth. The right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) made an extraordinary speech, given that the figure of 4.4 million was his. Those figures were published by the previous Government. We are currently examining the 700 responses to the Green Paper that he published. We do not dispute the figures, and neither does he.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Does the Minister agree or disagree with the comments of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Central (Mr. Caborn), who said that the green belt is up for grabs—yes or no?

Angela Eagle: That is not what he said. I will read exactly what he said. I have a transcript. He was asked by an interviewer:

"So the green belt is up for grabs then?"

My hon. Friend then said:

"The green belt is up for grabs as much as it ever was."

That is what that means: as much as it ever was, which is true because the Government have not changed the policy introduced by the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Eagle: No, I shall not give way. The right hon. Gentleman has had his chance to make his views known. It is interesting that he now talks about a 75 per cent. brown-field site target when his Government were considering 50 per cent. and seeing whether they could achieve 60 per cent. Out of government, he immediately finds another 15 per cent. The right hon. Gentleman made a disingenuous contribution to the debate.

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Eagle: No, I will not give way.

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman knows that the hon. Lady is not giving way. Let the debate be completed in the good order in which it has been conducted so far.

Angela Eagle: The right hon. Gentleman's speech was particularly disingenuous in the light of his previous responsibilities in government. In misrepresenting our policy on green-belt and brown-field sites, the right hon. Gentleman is simply scaremongering.

Are those Conservative Members who are worried about our policy prepared for us not to build the houses that we are required to build and to put up with the homelessness, the rising land prices and the dislocation in society that failure to make provision for the people who will need housing in the future will create?

Through the planning process, the Government will create as much brown-field site development as possible. However, we must remember that even in rural areas there are population and housing formulation changes. A smaller number of people are living in individual households and people are living longer in single households because of the success of our health services. We must ensure that new householders and young people have the chance to live in the areas in which they were brought up. Those living locally account for 90 per cent. of the predicted housing need. It is not the result of mass migration into the countryside. Conservative Members are simply scaremongering if they try to present it in that way.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk said that the right to roam was a socialist policy: good—I am glad that he recognises that. The hon. Gentleman is a well-known socialist theorist, possibly to rival Marx, so we all listen to what he has to say about what is a socialist policy. However, there will be no indiscriminate right to roam—rather a right to access. The right to access was in the manifesto on which we were elected and which was supported by many rural and urban voters.

We must balance the right of access to land with the responsible use of that right. The consultation paper will appear shortly and there will be a two to three month consultation period. We shall listen extremely carefully to the views of all those involved and we expect legislation on the issue in the next Session. I emphasise that, unlike Conservative Members who do not understand the meaning of the word consultation, the Government will take their duties in the consultative process extremely seriously.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid–Bedfordshire): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Eagle: No.

Mr. Sayeed *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must make clear her intentions.

Angela Eagle: In my usual polite way, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Sayeed: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Eagle: No. Is that clear enough?

In my usual polite way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was going to give way to the hon. Gentleman. I then realised that he had not even done the House the courtesy of being here for the debate. He may be a new Member, but he must not expect to walk in at the end of a debate and be heard. [HON. MEMBERS: "Retread."] Even though the hon. Gentleman is a retread or a recycled Member, if he wants to intervene he should do the House the courtesy of being here for the debate.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Angela Eagle: No.

The debate has shown that Labour is the party of the countryside, and that Labour understands and represents the interests of rural people the length and breadth of the land.

Mr. James Arbuthnot (North-East Hampshire) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 133, Noes 371.

Division No. 82] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid–Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple–Morris, Peter
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. John Whittingdale and Mr. James Cran.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin

Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez (Hastings)
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenniler *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Ptaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark

Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Jim Dowd.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 319, Noes 171.

Division No. 83] **[10.15 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Rt Hon Ron *(Caerphilly)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenniler *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*

Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Cynog
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Norman, Archie
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Dafydd
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. Patrick McLoughlin.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House deplores the neglect of the countryside and rural areas over the past eighteen years by the previous administration; congratulates the Government on its commitment to the countryside; welcomes the Government's intention to create the conditions necessary to let the rural economy flourish, to protect and enhance the rural environment and to enable everyone to enjoy the countryside; and further welcomes the start already made, notably on the reform of the CAP, the review of the Organic Aid Scheme, introducing Arable Stewardship, and reviewing the legislation for the protection of hedges and SSSIs.

Roads (East Sussex)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10.28 pm

Mr. Nigel Waterson (Eastbourne): I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise an issue of massive importance to my constituency and to East Sussex. It is of no small importance to those of my colleagues who made the trek to Eastbourne recently for what the press deemed to be our bonding session. It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in her place, with her minder.

The importance of the issue to East Sussex is borne out by the presence in the Chamber of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Mr. Wardle) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith). I have also had a note from the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster). Almost all parties are united by the need for a variety of improvements to our local roads. I know, for example, that my right hon. and hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye feel strongly about improvements to the A259 and related schemes. I pay special tribute to our former colleague, Tim Rathbone, who was Member for Lewes until the general election and a doughty fighter for the road schemes about which I am going to talk.

The first scheme involves the A27 between Lewes and Polegate. My preference would have been for complete dualling of that stretch, which is a massive traffic bottleneck. After much investigation, the previous Government produced a scaled-down project involving three schemes: the A27 Wilmington bypass, the Selmeston bypass, and the Southerham-Beddingham improvement. In his announcement of the scheme the then Minister responsible for roads noted:

"The A27 is a vital artery for Sussex."

How right he was. Had those improvements been pushed forward, they would have not only increased dramatically the road's effectiveness for business and tourism but made it a much safer carriageway for local people and visitors.

In a letter about the A27 to a local paper, the then county engineer stated:

"There are significant safety gains to be made from the provision of a modern dual carriageway",

which was all that the scheme involved and which would have produced an accident rate of approximately one third of that of the present single carriageway. The scheme would also have addressed all substantive environmental objections to the original A27 plans. As far as I can tell, that scheme lies a long way ahead and may have to wait for the next Conservative Government to see the light of day.

This evening I want to concentrate on the Polegate bypass, which in turn was part of the Weald and Downland design, build, finance and operate scheme. As the Minister will know from her briefing, the bypass is not a new idea but was envisaged before the war. Polegate is no longer in my constituency. In its wisdom, the boundary commission moved it into Lewes. The routes that go through Polegate are vital to my constituents. There are almost always major traffic problems in and near Polegate. The road is vital to our local road system, linking it to the M23, M25 and the port of Newhaven. Those wider connections are the reason for the presence of my right hon. and hon. Friends and of the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye. The issues go far wider than just Polegate.

I have taken delegations to meet more than one Minister. Most recently, in early July I took a delegation of constituents to meet Baroness Hayman to go through the issues. We represented a wide range of bodies: all the local authorities without exception; business organisations, including Sussex Enterprise; and representatives of the tourist industry, which is, of course, very important in our part of the world. That was backed up by hundreds of letters from large employers and others.

I pay tribute to Councillor Peter Wallis, chairman of the transport and environment committee in East Sussex county council and his excellent director Mr. Bob Wilkins, both of whom have been very supportive of my efforts and those of my colleagues.

In a recent document which was available to Baroness Hayman, East Sussex county council made the following point:

"Proposals to develop a Polegate bypass have been inextricably linked from the very beginning with the construction of the A22 new route from the A27 at Dittons to Seaside, Eastbourne as part of an overall strategy for the Eastbourne area."

It says that in the public inquiries over the scheme the inspector made it clear that

"the Orders for the A22 should be confirmed unless the Polegate Bypass was removed from the National Roads Programme."

The new A22 route in my constituency, that would take traffic from the industrial areas and the Sovereign Harbour area of Eastbourne up to Dittons Corner by Polegate, is a major road project costing £28 million which is nearing completion. If it linked up with the Polegate bypass, if that were built, there would be considerable benefits for the area. According to the county council, there would be immediate benefits of some 1,500 jobs in the new business parks in the Eastbourne Park area as part of the Eastbourne borough plan. As the county council points out, these sites are currently landlocked and need to be opened up by the development of the new route.

High-quality office developments will create about 1,000 jobs in Sovereign Harbour, the new marina development incorporating many berths for yachts, houses and in due course shops and a hotel. There is also the possibility of commercial development.

It is no exaggeration for the county council to say:

"The strategy for sustainable development in East Sussex would be fundamentally undermined if the proposed trunk road improvements in the county associated with the Weald and Downland Network DBFO package were now to be withdrawn . . . Such a decision would have a devastating impact on the county's prospects for economic recovery."

We need a dual carriageway paralleling the south coast between the A23 and the A21.

The improvements are supported by every local authority in the area and by Sussex Enterprise. The Polegate bypass scheme had gone through all its statutory stages and was ready to start construction at the time of the general election. The Polegate bypass must be a dual carriageway as it not only carries east-west traffic around Polegate, but north-south traffic into Eastbourne.

Hon. Members can imagine my concern and that of the councils involved and many residents in the area when, as part of the Government's roads review earlier this year,

it was decided that the scheme would be put on hold at least until next spring and possibly would never see the light of day. As the county council said, that would have a devastating impact on the area.

I have received hundreds of letters of support for the project and expressions of disappointment and distress at its suspension or possible cancellation. A company called T. Cox & Son Ltd. wrote:

"The cancellation of a new A27 Lewes to Polegate trunk road was a major consideration in our decision to relocate . . . from Eastbourne to Tonbridge."

One of our major local employers, Anglo Dutch Meats, employing more than 300 people, wrote:

"We have continued to invest in the area because of the previous Government's commitment to improving the road system. However, if this commitment is now not to be honoured, we will be forced to consider relocation of our factories which will result in an increase in unemployment for Eastbourne and Hastings."

Mr. Charles Wardle (Bexhill and Battle): May I assure my hon. Friend that his important message will be endorsed by every sensible thinker in the county? May I link with his remarks about Polegate the importance of the Hastings eastern and the Hastings western and Bexhill bypasses and, with them, the Marsh road link over the Pevensey levels? Those matter to local development as well as to through traffic to and from the channel tunnel.

Mr. Waterson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—this is a seamless robe of projects that hang together.

Another letter I received came from the leading surveyors and valuers Stiles Harold Williams and referred to one of its clients. The letter states:

"I think there is little doubt that until the Bypass is built our client's development, which has planning consent which would create 250-500 permanent jobs will not go ahead."

Just to show that there is almost total unanimity on the subject of the Polegate bypass, I have a press release issued by Councillor Roy Martin, who is not only town mayor of Polegate and someone with whom I have worked from time to time, but a leading local Liberal Democrat. He writes:

"I now consider it is time for the silent majority in Polegate who are concerned about the lack of a dual carriageway By-Pass around the town to relieve the intolerable noise, vibration and air pollution problems experienced by residents, to speak up."

I entirely agree with that.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): I should add that those in the industrial estates to the north of Eastbourne have told me in strong terms that they regard it as a bad decision to postpone these improvements, seemingly indefinitely.

Mr. Waterson: My right hon. Friend and I have received correspondence on this subject from many of the same companies.

I have three important questions for the Minister. First, how much compensation is being paid, or is to be paid, to the successful contractors—money that could be spent on the bypass itself? I have seen a variety of figures quoted. *The Times*, referring to the Paymaster General, spoke of

"a compensation bill of more than £6 million".

A local newspaper quoted a figure of £143 million, but I believe that that covers all the projects that were put on hold at the same time. Both are amazing figures, nevertheless.

Secondly, does the Minister accept that there are substantial benefits for the local communities from the project going ahead? On that subject, it is interesting to see the document attached to the very press statement announcing the Minister of Transport's decision on 28 July. On safety, that document states:

"Improvements in standards of routes have been forecast to bring accident savings"

and on environment, it states:

"Lamberhurst Bypass, Polegate Bypass and the A259 Hastings schemes would remove through traffic from settlements"—

settlements being that rather unsatisfactory word used to mean places where people live.

Thirdly, when can we expect a decision? I know that the Government are all about rolling programmes of reviews and more reviews, but sooner or later—surely—there has to be a decision. Originally, we were told that the review would be completed by next spring, yet, only last week in the *Sussex Express*, fears were expressed that

"a decision on the Polegate bypass could be further delayed"

because of an announcement by the Minister of Transport, who said that

"the Polegate scheme is one of eight 'case studies' to be reappraised in an attempt to find a better way of taking decisions on new roads."

I can tell the Minister a better way, which is to take a decision of some sort.

In conclusion, the Minister must be aware from all the representations, letters and other documents that she and her colleagues have received that there is anger and disappointment, which I share, among my constituents on this subject. It is no good fobbing us off with talk of yet another review. We need the Polegate bypass now. If we do not have it now, first we shall have contractors who will be paid not to build it; secondly, we shall have spent £28 million of taxpayers' money on the new A22, which ends in the middle of a field—the biggest and most expensive cul de sac in Europe and a monument to the Government's inability to make decisions; and, thirdly, my constituents will face ever more job losses in a shrinking local economy, not to mention a massive inconvenience to both local residents and visitors to the area. Furthermore, my constituents living along or near the existing A22 can expect no improvement whatever—indeed, a deterioration—in both road safety and the local environment.

I urge the Minister to give us some hard indication tonight that that project and the whole of that DBFO scheme will be taken out of the review and initiated so that work can start as soon as possible.

10.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): Before I respond to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), may I offer my apologies to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the whole House and particularly to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) for my failure to be present in the House for last night's Adjournment debate. I can offer neither excuse nor reason, simply my most humble apologies.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

I thank the hon. Member for Eastbourne for raising these important issues, and for being so generous in affording time to his hon. Friends on issues that are clearly important not only to Eastbourne but to East Sussex. I also thank him for setting his concerns on infrastructure improvements in East Sussex strongly and clearly within the context of community needs, regeneration and safety.

I understand the hon. Gentleman's desire for early decisions on the schemes that he mentioned, but he will know that the Government have embarked on a fundamental review of transport policy. This is not a "fobbing off" exercise. Our objectives are for a strong economy, a sustainable environment and an inclusive society. As he pointed out, transport is a vital part of all those aims.

The backdrop to our fundamental review is a candid recognition that we need a shift in direction. Revised national road traffic forecasts published last month show traffic increasing by nearly 40 per cent. over the next 20 years. If current policies continue, congestion will get worse, the impact on the environment will be even more severe, and those who have no access to private transport will find it even more difficult to get around.

We must develop an integrated transport system that makes the best use of the contribution that each mode can make; ensures that all options are considered on a basis that is fair and is seen to be fair; and takes into account, from the outset, considerations of accessibility, integration, safety, the environment and the economy. Above all—I have little doubt that the hon. Gentleman will agree with me here—an integrated transport system must be sustainable. One of the encouraging aspects of what is, indeed, an ambitious task is the degree of consensus on the need for change.

It is a feature of the policy development work now under way that we are involving a wide range of external advice and expertise, including local authorities, business, trade unions, transport professionals and transport users. That is the context for the roads review, examining the role that trunk roads should play in an integrated and sustainable transport policy. Against the background of increased congestion, we have three broad options for roads: first, to make better use of existing infrastructure; secondly, to manage demand; and thirdly, to provide new infrastructure.

To make best use of existing infrastructure is the obvious first choice. It has been provided at substantial cost in both financial and environmental terms, and we must make the best use of that investment. Technologies old and new can help in making better use of our roads network. A number of measures can also bring safety benefits, and we will need to ensure that these are given proper priority. We need, however, to be realistic about what the various options can deliver.

We must also look seriously at other harder options: managing demand and providing new infrastructure. Managing demand is a vast topic. It encompasses reducing the need to travel, by land use planning for example, an assessment of the extent to which a shift to other modes can be encouraged, and inevitably the question of controlling demand by pricing or rationing mechanisms.

At a local level, many local authorities are seeking, by means of integrated transport packages, to combine these measures, so that mobility is maintained but adverse consequences of that mobility are reduced.

The Highways Agency's programme of small safety schemes is continuing, but major new construction is under review. Providing new infrastructure is a very difficult option, financially and in terms of the impact that it may have on the environment. Our starting point is that we shall not proceed with major new road construction unless we are satisfied that there is no better alternative; even then, there will be difficult choices to be made within the limited resources available.

There is no substitute for rigorous case-by-case examination of the options. Volume II of our consultation document "What Role for Trunk Roads?" sets out, region by region, the perceived traffic problems and the roads programme inherited from our predecessors.

Mr. Wardle: As my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson) has already asked, how long is all this likely to take?

Ms Jackson: We have given a clear commitment that the White Paper, which will be fundamental to our policy for integrated transport, will be published early next year.

The existence of a scheme in the inherited programme is seen as prima facie evidence that there is a transport problem. We are seeking from our regional consultations a view on whether these are the most important problems or whether others deserve greater priority. We envisage two outputs from that part of the review: a firm, short-term investment programme and a programme of studies to consider the remaining problems out of which the medium and long-term investment programme will emerge.

The Government office for the south-east has held three day-long seminars as part of our consultation process on integrated transport. A seminar in Ashford on 14 October considered transport corridors in the east of the region, including the south coast route and north-south routes between the M25 and the south coast.

Points that the hon. Member for Eastbourne has made about the importance of the Polegate bypass, the improvements between Lewes and Polegate, and other trunk road schemes in terms of safety, regeneration, environmental relief and integration with local transport investment and land use planning objectives, were strongly made at that seminar, and we shall be taking those views into account along with the written and other representations that we have received.

I recognise the importance of the A22 scheme from Dittons to Eastbourne town centre in terms of the relief it provides to the existing A22 and the access it affords to expanding commercial and industrial areas. However, we cannot allow a decision on the Polegate bypass to be driven by this alone. Should the bypass not go ahead, we would, of course, need to consider alternatives with the Highways Agency and local authorities.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne and other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster), have also supported other schemes, which, together with the Polegate bypass, made up the Weald and Downland DBFO—design, build, finance and operate—project, considered this summer as

part of the accelerated review. I take the opportunity to offer an assurance that the points that he and others made will be fully taken into account in the current review.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne mentioned some local concern at the announcement that the Polegate bypass scheme is one of eight case studies being analysed as part of a project to develop a new appraisal framework. The aim is to define a method capable of looking at all potential solutions to transport problems, and identifying options that best meet the objectives of integration, accessibility, safety, economy and environmental impacts. The purpose is to develop a new appraisal methodology rather than to study a specific case per se. The Polegate bypass is one of the eight because it was felt to be a good example of its type, and had already been studied in some depth.

Developing a forward-looking integrated transport policy that supports a strong economy, contributes to a sustainable environment and helps to create a just and inclusive society is, as I have said, a huge challenge. Through the work now under way on trunk roads, we want to achieve a robust short-term programme and a system for planning future investment in the road network—whether measures to make better use of the existing network or to provide new infrastructure—which is fair and seen to be fair, which allows a proper opportunity for all concerned to make their contribution, and which looks at transport problems squarely in the context of an integrated strategy.

Of the three questions that the hon. Member for Eastbourne posed, I trust that I have covered the last two. However, if he believes that I have failed to respond to some issues in detail, he should write to me, and I shall be happy to reply. As to compensation, all bids will be reviewed on their merits. The amounts to which he referred are mere speculation. We are examining such bids and, as I said, they will be reviewed on their merits.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 5 November 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Road Safety

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

9.34 am

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): It is 10 years since the committee chaired by Dr. Peter North prepared its report on our road traffic laws. Since then, most of the changes in the laws affecting road traffic have been based on its recommendations. Ten years on, I believe that it is time to take a fresh look at road safety, for two reasons.

First, the committee did not directly consider the issue of road safety; it was not within its terms of reference, a fact acknowledged in the report by its author. Secondly, many changes have taken place in the past 10 years. The volume of traffic has increased enormously and road safety technology has made huge advances. There is also the recent phenomenon of road rage, most graphically brought to our attention recently by the tragic deaths of Toby Exley and Karen Martin in an incident west of London.

Another factor is the strength of feeling of bereaved families that suffer the loss of loved ones in killings on our roads. They see that the law is not effective enough to prevent those deaths or to punish those who cause them. That view was prevalent at the time of the North committee report, which mentioned that bereaved families felt that the criminal law was too lenient to those who caused deaths on our roads. That that strength of feeling has continued—and hardened—over the past 10 years, despite changes in the law as recommended by the committee, is testament enough that something more needs to be done.

I do not claim that this debate alone constitutes a thoroughgoing investigation of road safety, but I hope that it contributes to a continuing interest in road safety during this Parliament. In my contribution to the debate, I wish to concentrate on two road safety issues: drinking and driving, and speeding.

The scale of the problem of drinking and driving is all too apparent from the figures. Every year, more than 500 deaths on our roads are due to illegal levels of alcohol consumption by one or other of those involved. A quarter of those deaths are children. More than 10 people die every week. Another 40 people per week avoid death but suffer serious injury. In fairness, those figures were worse at the time of the North committee's deliberations by a factor of two, but since 1993, the reductions obtained following the committee's report have come to an end. Many people speak of our having reached a plateau. A plateau where 500 people die each year because of drink driving is not an acceptable point to stop. We must seek new measures to reduce deaths.

Every death on the road involves personal tragedy for many people. I should like to give one example from my constituency, to illustrate how far and wide the effects can run. The family of Mrs. Ingram in Penkridge included a brother, Gordon Husselbee, who emigrated with his wife to Australia. Last year, Mr. and Mrs. Husselbee returned for a once-in-a-lifetime reunion with their family in Penkridge. During the trip, they went out for a day to Ashbourne with two other family members, another couple. As they returned from a lovely day out, their car was struck by a lorry, killing the two men in the car and seriously injuring both women. The driver of the lorry was found to be three times over the legal limit for alcohol, even though he was working at the time.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), who is not in his place, has particularly asked me to make it known that he, too, wishes to join me in extending sympathy and condolences to the family on their tragic double loss in 1996. He also shares my determination that changes should be made to prevent similar deaths in the future. The hon. Gentleman represented Penkridge until the general election, when boundary changes removed it from his seat.

Alcohol impairs a driver's capability, and the more alcohol that is consumed, the greater the impairment. I believe that the legal limit should be reduced from 80 mg in 100 ml of blood to 50 mg. That would save lives year in, year out. There is public support for such a change, and it is also supported by the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety and the British Medical Association. I also believe that there is a proposal to harmonise the level at 50 mg across the European Union, but that is not why I believe that such a change should be made. I have made that suggestion because I believe that it is right for the roads of Britain. What is the Government's view?

After Mrs. Ingram and her family recovered from the natural grief that they felt at the loss of two members of their family, they suffered frustration and anger at the way in which the criminal system dealt with the driver who caused those deaths. They therefore determined to make a difference themselves, and from the market towns of Staffordshire they have collected a petition of more than 10,000 signatures calling for changes to the way in which the legal process deals with drivers who cause deaths through drink-driving. The Minister has kindly agreed to meet the family after the debate to receive their petition.

That petition calls for the immediate suspension of a driver's licence when he or she has caused death through drink-driving. It also advocates more use of the charge of manslaughter and greater opportunities for medical advisers to deny a driving licence on medical grounds.

A principled approach to reducing the number of deaths through drink-driving requires punishment that reflects the seriousness of the offence; an effective deterrent and consistent education. The punishment should reflect the revulsion felt by decent people when an innocent life is taken because of the irresponsibility of someone who drinks and drives. In 1994, 18 charges for manslaughter were brought, but not a single conviction was achieved. In 1995, there were just four convictions. In appropriate cases, manslaughter should be the appropriate charge.

[Mr. David Kidney]

It is also wrong that drivers who cause death because of their excessive consumption of alcohol should continue to be at liberty to drive their vehicles between the time of the death and their eventual appearance before the court for sentence—often many months later. At the moment, the only possible restriction available is when a court imposes a bail condition that a person should not drive, but sometimes even the appearance at court is delayed for many weeks if the police bail a person from the police station.

A driver's licence should be suspended immediately if he is charged with a drink-driving offence. It is up to him to apply to a court before his trial if he considers that there is a reason why he should be entitled to keep his licence. Prison sentences should also be longer in appropriate cases when irresponsible drink-driving has led to death on the roads.

The best deterrent is when drivers know that there is a high risk of detection. That has led some to call for random breath testing by the police. Police powers to administer roadside breath tests are already quite wide. They can test after a road accident; after observing moving traffic offences; and if they suspect that a driver has consumed alcohol. The Government could help to strengthen the current law if they established uniform practice by all police forces. For example, Staffordshire police policy is to administer roadside breath tests after all road accidents, and all year round.

Effective education about the dangers of drink-driving should also be given all year round. In recent years, we have become accustomed to hard-hitting advertisements on our television screens just before Christmas and sometimes at the height of summer. All-year-round education would make a difference.

Those who drive under the influence of drugs represent a growing problem, but the technology for the detection of such drivers lags behind that aimed at discovering those who drink and drive. The dangers posed by that practice are increasing.

Speed is a bigger killer than drink-driving. In 1996, the then Minister estimated that 1,200 lives had been lost in the previous year because of excessive speed, including 160 children. Given that that is equivalent to more than 20 lives lost every week, urgent action is required.

A partnership has been established between the Staffordshire police force and the county council, which has led to a big investment in speed cameras and radar for the detection of drivers over the speed limit. The county town of Stafford is a speed enforcement zone. There are warning signs on every road entering the town and an abundance of speed cameras. They are sited according to laid-down criteria relating to fatal or serious accidents in a set period. That programme has dramatically reduced speed and injuries. Average speeds have dropped by 6.5 mph and the injury/accident rate has fallen by 29 per cent. That mirrors the evidence of the first pilot scheme that was conducted in west London in 1993, which led to average speed reductions of 10 per cent. and a fall in the injury/accident rate of 21 per cent.

The availability of resources for such a high-profile, consistent campaign against speeding is a problem. The Staffordshire police could not have afforded to buy all the necessary cameras for that strategy without the support of the county council. That reflects the strength of the partnership between the two organisations. The administration of speed camera detection involves the installation and maintenance of cameras, and the imposition of fixed fines. All those processes cost money. Will the Government consider adding an amount to the fixed fine to be paid to the police to cover that administration? That the speeding motorist should pay a slightly higher fine is in keeping with the notion that the punishment should fit the crime. The use of more cameras adds to the deterrent.

We should also educate drivers to understand not just that it is wrong to break the law, but that inappropriate speed causes accidents, injuries and deaths. Sometimes, drivers fail to see the need for particular speed limits—more needs to be done to establish in their minds the link between particular speed limits and the requirement for them to observe them. I commend such developments as local speed plans, safe routes to school and highlighting the special need for caution on rural roads.

Each year, an unacceptably high number of adults and children die on our roads. Responsible drivers want to drive in ways that minimise the risk of death and injury to other road users. A responsible Parliament will want to encourage and guide improved road safety through road layout designs and signs, vehicle specifications, driver training and testing, public education and the enforcement of our criminal laws, including effective punishment that commands widespread public support.

Parliament is not alone in seeking to achieve those ends—many organisations are willing to help. They include the police, local government, PACTS, which I mentioned earlier, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and even, I am pleased to learn, Vauxhall, which recently launched a campaign for children to be seen and to be safe on their way to and from school each day under the title, "Glow power—It's cool to be seen."

Today's debate comes early in the new Parliament. Perhaps we should look on our mission of improving road safety as a journey—naturally, a road journey. We sit in the driving seat, barely having switched on the engine and checked the rear-view mirror. I hope that today we shall signal our intention to move forward. From today, we must travel—wisely and safely, of course—towards our journey's end, where we shall want to look back with satisfaction on the fact that fewer people have been injured on our roads and fewer killed.

9.49 am

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): The House will be grateful to the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) for raising this subject and for the way in which he introduced the debate. I suspect that there will be both all-party agreement and Government action on the two specific points that he made, which I shall rehearse and emphasise.

The first is that if someone has been caught above the legal limit for alcohol when driving, it is clearly right that their licence should be suspended—whether or not there has been an injury—until the case has come to court, with the sole exception of the accused person going to court and asking the court for special permission to have the licence back until the case is heard. That should be the way forward. It is wrong and anomalous that someone

who has committed an offence—in all senses, an absolute offence—should be able to delay the beginning of part of the punishment by the arbitrary factor of when the case comes to court.

If I were apprehended in Victoria street with a dangerous weapon, I would not be given the weapon back until the case involving the charge of carrying an offensive weapon was heard. I hope that what the hon. Member for Stafford has said will help the Minister for Transport in London to negotiate with other members of the Government—the Law Officers and the Home Office—to ensure that it becomes mandatory or, if not mandatory, conventional that a licence is suspended until a case comes to court. Clearly, if there are exceptional circumstances, those can be heard by the court, but it should be an exception that a driver carries on driving until the case is heard after having been apprehended and arrested for being above the legal limit for alcohol or for refusing to take a blood or breath test.

The second point raised by the hon. Member for Stafford that I want to reinforce strongly is that the costs of speed cameras and red light cameras should be recycled through charges. I do not want to delve into ancient history, but we had the same sort of argument over the enforcement of the parking meter system that the Ministers of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will be having with Ministers from other Departments about this issue. The central Exchequer got the benefit of the penalties for overstaying at a parking meter, but the local authority had to find the costs of enforcement. That was changed and led to the City of Westminster, for example, receiving an immediate increase in income of £3 million a year; more important, however, was that the change made the parking meter system effective.

The task facing us is to make camera enforcement effective—not because we want to catch more people, but because we want more drivers to behave in the way that they would if they saw a liveried police car behind them or at their side. Only if enforcement works can the deterrent effect be achieved and that simply requires agreement on the recycling of all or part of the penalty, so that it becomes a charge and the system becomes a net cost regime.

I should declare, as is stated in the Register of Members' Interests, that I give evidence on occasion to lawyers in America on a civil liability case relating to small four-by-four vehicles. It is not relevant to the debate except that, as a result, I might be called an expert on road casualty reduction.

In general, we should try to move our debates away from road safety to the specific expression, casualty reduction. We could achieve a great increase in road safety without affecting the decisions that drivers like me make, which lead to the deaths of about 3,500 people a year. The reason for concentrating on casualty reduction is that that is what has been happening since the number of road deaths peaked at between 8,000 and 9,000 a year. The hon. Member for Stafford rightly referred to the increase in traffic and, in another debate, I would say how we can help to improve the position of those who walk and those who cycle, but today we are concentrating on motorised vehicle casualties.

There has been continuous progress and, speaking as a former Minister, I do not want to sound as if I am saying that my period as a Minister was when the process started. I see the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) in his place: he was one of the founders of the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day), who worked as the co-chairman of that body for a long time. It is also right to acknowledge the effective work of Jeanne Breene, who was the director before Robert Gifford of PACTS, and who now leads the European Transport Safety Council.

To pick up the position in 1986, which was about the time of the North report on road traffic law, I support the hon. Member for Stafford in saying that it is time to have another review of the law. I do not believe, however, that the North process was the particular factor that led to the drop in casualties.

In 1987, we set the target of cutting casualties by a third by 2000, regardless of the increase in traffic. We made a mistake—I made a mistake—because it was not possible to achieve that for slight injuries and we should have said so at the time; but we were right to set targets for death and serious injury resulting from accidents, which create gaps in families and cause as much pain as terrorism or homicide.

We hope that the Government will continue to make progress towards setting new targets, by category and with some idea of how those targets will be achieved. We need to consider pedestrians and the two-wheelers, both pedal powered and motorised. We need to consider passengers and drivers. We need to understand what has happened in the past.

I want to make a criticism of our media and then praise them. The criticism is that, since the world's most famous car crash happened in Paris two or three months ago, I have not spotted in the British or continental press any comparison, over time and by country, of seat belt-wearing rates, of the incidence of drink-driving or of the changes in the casualty rate in various countries. That is not the only thing that matters—there were other aspects to the death of the princess and her companions—but had they died because they had trodden on a land mine or been assaulted with a machete, people would have started to ask, "What about land mines?" or, "What about machetes?" It is no good covering such a crash, which gets almost the whole world paying attention for a week or longer, while ignoring the question of what can be done about rates of drink-driving, which might have dropped in some countries more than in others.

My praise for the media is that the fact that drink-driving became unfashionable, against the culture of young people in the late 1980s, was in large part because of the then sole national pop music station, Radio 1. When the controller, Johnny Beerling, approved of Radio 1 treating drink-driving as a news and current affairs issue for young people, he and the disc jockeys made a big difference to the outcome. I shall quote the figures, and I hope that anyone in the media who reads our debate will pay attention to them and start asking how we can transfer that success to the middle-aged, which is the age of most Members of Parliament. The number of people dying in drink-drive crashes fell from 1,800 18 years ago, to 1,200 in 1986, to less than 600 now. Those figures are dramatic.

The same rate of improvement is possible for older people, but only if we do not rely on hard-hitting advertisements or a hard-hitting judicial approach. I shall not argue against sentencing solutions, but it is the culture that makes the biggest difference.

[Mr. Peter Bottomley]

If, when I am out of an evening—at a pub, club, party or someone else's home—people expect me not to drink alcohol before driving, that is more powerful than the legal limit. If, as a host, I feel an obligation to have alcohol-free drink within reach of those who are driving, that is more powerful than changing the legal limit. If, when people such as me are charged with driving with excess alcohol in their blood, magistrates ask with whom I was drinking and where I had been—not to charge the other people, but to make them feel part of that social culture—we shall get the same improvement among older people that we got among younger people.

It has become fashionable to say that we do not need to spend money on new roads. That is wrong. In far too many communities, shopping centres, residential streets and school precincts are dominated by passing traffic. Whatever impact we can make with traffic management arrangements, we still need to remove traffic, wherever possible, from where people are.

The A27 bypass in west Worthing may not go ahead, but we need to ensure that the county council and national Government have the necessary resources to build the roads that reduce casualties.

Part of the reason for the reduction in the number of deaths has been the money spent on new through roads—not just on road traffic management schemes, although they are vital.

If, in five or 10 years' time, we can say that the number of deaths has fallen from 3,500 to 2,500, or to below 2,000, that will show that we have continued with measures that work. The very worst approach is to do things just because they sound good.

We must continue with the things that work best; very often they are also the cheapest option. In that way, we can fulfil our responsibility to cut the number of casualties effectively.

10 am

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): I want to echo the views expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), and to concentrate on one aspect of road safety—safe routes to schools—with illustrations from my constituency.

It is deeply ironic that some of the most dangerous parts of our roads at crucial times of the day—very early in the morning and the middle of the afternoon—are near our primary and secondary schools. It is even more ironic, perhaps, that because parents have become increasingly worried about their children's safety on the way to and from school, they have begun to take their children there by car—thus compounding the problem and making the roads busier and more dangerous.

In my constituency, several schools are on dangerous roads, and, like many hon. Members, I receive a great deal of correspondence and a great many telephone calls—not to mention representations at my surgeries—from constituents who are concerned about the problem.

Most recently, in the town of Poulton Le Fylde only a few weeks ago, a young person was seriously injured when she was knocked down near her former primary school on the way to her high school. The incident took place in the area of Carr Head lane and Hardhorn road, both of which are near the two schools concerned, Baines high school and Carr Head primary. Fortunately, although she was seriously injured, she is making a good recovery. As often happens after such accidents, a massive campaign to make the roads safer around those two schools has been launched, led by that redoubtable campaigner, Mrs. Hughes, of Poulton Le Fylde. A petition has been got up, there have been interviews on the local radio and press, and local politicians have been lobbied.

Two weeks from now, I shall chair a meeting that will bring together huge numbers of parents, the police, the county council highways department and the borough council. In our well-meaning way, we shall all desperately try to find a solution that will make the roads safer. Some of those roads are winding roads; one of them has a particularly dangerous bend in it. None of them was built to carry the amount of traffic that now uses them, or to accommodate the amount of traffic that routinely parks along them at the very time when children are going into or coming out of school.

At the meeting, we shall discuss crossing patrols. Indeed, Mrs. Hughes and her friends have already secured a new school crossing patrol for the area. We shall talk about a new zebra crossing, about traffic-calming measures and about reducing speeds to 20 mph. At some point, we shall have to discuss the understandable but unacceptable methods used to allocate priority as between road safety measures. We shall have to examine the number of serious accidents—fortunately, no deaths yet—that have occurred in the area. In short, the whole point of the meeting will be to prevent such tragedies in future.

The point will be made that by taking preventive action and recognising the dangers, local people may be able to alleviate the problem, but, at the same time, they may undermine their case for road safety improvements. No doubt our discussions will be quite heated at times, but I hope that we shall be able to make r[illegible]rogress and to improve safety on the roads near those two schools for the children who use them.

We need a fundamental reordering of priorities; more attention must be paid to the needs of vulnerable pedestrians—children and older people. The Government need to get to grips with the problem, perhaps in the transport White Paper. Local authorities need more support in the work of creating safe routes to schools. The reordering of priorities to which I referred must result in road safety for vulnerable people not being tacked on to the end of debates but being kept at the forefront of everyone's mind.

10.7 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I thank the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) for initiating this morning's debate. Britain's road safety record is good, but there is no doubt that it can be improved on. We often hear the past 18 years mentioned in derogatory terms; in this case, we can congratulate the previous Administration on what they achieved in that time.

The hon. Member for Stafford outlined certain measures which he believes will help. I agree with increasing the number of speed cameras and reviewing the drink-driving laws. As he dealt with that in some detail, I shall touch on it only briefly.

The transport priorities that my party supports will contribute, directly or indirectly, to improving road safety. I refer to maximising the potential of rail for the carriage

of freight and passengers; to reducing traffic totals; to a shift from private to public transport; and crucially, to reducing the need to travel. We must implement planning measures and initiatives such as teleworking to good effect, so that people do not have to get in their cars at all. Local authorities have a key role in dealing with road safety and I shall outline some of the measures that my local authority, the London borough of Sutton, of which I am still a councillor, has introduced in the past two years.

The first measure that I commend to the House is STEPs—the strategic traffic and environment projects—which is a traffic-calming initiative. We have worked out criteria on which to introduce traffic-calming measures based on, for instance, the number of schools, rat runs, and accidents in a given area, and whether cycle paths exist there. We then identified the top priorities for traffic-calming measures within the borough. Rather than address each road piecemeal, we have dealt with all the traffic-calming measures in a particular square to ensure that traffic-calming measures do not simply shift traffic to a parallel road with no speed humps or other such measure. That has been successful and we have been gradually—regrettably, all too gradually—working our way round the borough introducing traffic-calming measures.

We are working hard on a network of safe cycle paths, which I occasionally use, and we want to introduce cycling in parks. May I take this opportunity to ask the Home Office to respond as quickly as possible to our request for a change in the byelaws? The council has introduced a mileage allowance for council employees using their bicycles to get to work or to council business. It introduced a "leave your car at home" day, which was supported by the health authority and many large businesses locally. I participated in that interesting exercise on a day when I had three or four constituency visits to make and it was pouring with rain. I concluded that it was achievable but not very easy.

Like many other authorities throughout the country, the council has introduced small-scale measures such as flashing lights to warn motorists when they are approaching a school. Those operate when children travel to, or return from, school. However, we want local authorities to have greater powers in respect of road safety. Speed cameras have already been mentioned. Local authorities, in consultation with the police, should be able to install those and use the revenues generated by them to improve traffic safety in their boroughs. Traffic wardens, who are now the responsibility of local authorities, need further powers to take action against non-moving traffic. We also want more 20 mph limits in appropriate places.

Those are some of the specific proposals that have been made. Another key measure that would directly or indirectly improve road safety is our pledge to increase the number of police by 3,000. People are deterred by the chance of being caught, whether for speeding or for drink-drive offences. Driving tests or probationary periods also need to be reviewed because there are far too many boy racers dashing around. At the risk of stereotyping, I shall describe them to the House: they wear their baseball caps the wrong way round and one can hear their loud sound systems blaring at traffic lights. They have only just passed their test, and believe that they are the local Schumacher and know everything that they need to know about driving. Unfortunately, they have learned the mechanical skills of driving rather than how to anticipate problems.

Further significant improvements in road safety could be achieved by introducing the full range of measures that I have outlined. Had those measures been in place, I may not have had the visitor that I had to my advice centre a couple of weeks ago. He was a postman who had been in a hit-and-run accident and has since been trying to get back his job with the Post Office. We want to reduce those tragedies still further. Should the Government decide to legislate on any of those measures or review the law, the Liberal Democrats would support them.

10.14 am

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on introducing this debate. I also congratulate the Minister for Transport in London on her new post. I have not had a chance to do so since she took over, and I hope that we can all work carefully and well together on the important issue of road safety.

May I issue a warning to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford? If he gets involved in road safety, he will get rather a reputation. Those of us who have been interested in the subject for many years have become known as eccentric. It is strange that the core of us who have, over the years, tried to maintain the House's interest in road safety are regarded as slightly odd, but it is also the most satisfying part of one's work. I spent many years in opposition—from 1979 until six months ago—and one of the few achievements in my career has been to make a difference in the number of people who have died or been seriously injured on our roads.

I became involved in this issue because my first private Member's Bill was the Children in Cars Bill, which was accepted by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). We moved on to a wonderful fight to achieve seat belt legislation, which was a Back-Bench success against the leaders of both main parties in the House. I mark that up to show that Back Benchers can make achievements over Ministers, if Ministers do not always go along with us. The reduction in the number of casualties shows the importance of seat belt legislation.

When I first came to the House, 1,000 young men a year were being killed on motorcycles. If 1,000 young men had been killed in a foreign war, one could imagine the debate in this House. One of the proudest achievements that our little group can boast is that we took on the motorcycle lobby and the Japanese manufacturers, and came up with proposals, which were eventually accepted by Ministers, for training motorcyclists and making large motorcycles less available less quickly. We have seen the results.

In that struggle, we formed the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, of which we are extremely proud. We learned early on that, if we wanted to make changes in respect of road safety, we would have to build a partnership between politicians, Ministers, police, road safety organisations outside this place and every concerned citizen. The best way to form partnerships is not to have "hearts and flowers" campaigns. I have seen those come and go and they do not work. The campaigns that work are those based on good science,

[Mr. Barry Sheerman]

good technological information and best practice world wide. Adopting or adapting best practice in a society like ours, whether it is in Australia, Canada, the United States or elsewhere, can often be valuable, but applying good methods and involving the best brains in the business is also important. We made sure that we brought together the academics, medics and other experts.

Increasingly, responsibility for the legislation that we used to pass has moved to Europe. I do not regret that, but many of the changes that we need to make—construction, use and much else—depend on achieving a Europe-wide, positive move. We set up the European Transport Safety Council, which is now one of the most respected transport safety lobbies in Europe. We must not forget that we must work with our European partners to bring the standards across Europe up to our standards, and then all improve together. Many of our people increasingly drive not just on United Kingdom roads, but on European Union roads, and some of those roads are extremely dangerous. We must broaden our horizons to protect our constituents' interests.

We are on a plateau, and more changes are needed. Too many people are losing their lives or suffering dreadful physical damage that affects their entire lives. We must continue to reduce casualty figures. One of the most important measures is speed control. That must be done intelligently, and the Government will have to provide more money for speed cameras and enforcement.

If we are interested in safety on the roads, we must not be seen as ghastly people who want to hang, draw and quarter offenders or lock them up for a long time. I do not want to do that to any of my fellow citizens; I want to prevent them committing the crime in the first place. Deterrence works, and the most effective deterrent is if people know that, if they go on the road and speed, or go on the road having drunk, there is a high chance that they will be caught. I want to save their lives, as well as those of their victims on the roads. A drink-driving accident destroys at least two families.

We need enforcement in relation to drink-driving and speeding. I do not know the Minister's mind on that, and sometimes, even within this exclusive company, we disagree. I have always been a champion of random breath testing. It must be introduced, as it is effective in cutting down the number of people who drink and drive.

I agree with the former Minister, the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley), who said that it is imperative to change the culture, so that it becomes unacceptable to drink and drive or to speed. When that happens, we shall know that we have succeeded.

All the statistics show that children—and, to a lesser extent, old people—as pedestrians, and as cyclists, are especially vulnerable. The number of children involved in accidents is extremely worrying. Why, in particular parts of our towns and cities, are there more incidents in which children are killed or seriously injured? The picture is complicated, but we must confront it.

As someone who still has a couple of children at school, I notice as I drive around at school time that there is a relaxation in seat belt wearing among children, which concerns me greatly. One sees very few convictions for not having a child sitting safely in a car. The worst thing is for a small child to sit on an adult's lap in the front seat. I thought that that had been pushed out of our culture. I hope that my hon. Friend will speak to her colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment about renewing awareness that it is unacceptable behaviour to carry children in cars if they are not secured safely.

Enforcement is the key. We must maintain a cross-party approach. Sometimes there is a little party political argy-bargy, but not much. By and large, people of good will have worked extremely hard to make road safety a success. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford will not get any medals; he will get a reputation for slight eccentricity, but I welcome him aboard.

10.23 am

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley (South-West Surrey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on securing the opportunity for a debate of such importance.

Four years ago, I introduced the "Health of the Nation" strategy, which looked for key areas in which we could reduce ill health, disability and death. One of those was accidents, in which road safety is a critical element. That was certainly an area in which the strategy of cross-party alliances was welcomed by the then Opposition.

I endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman). I have been pleased to see the way in which the present Government have built on the focus of prevention in health. I am confident that the introduction of collaboration between the Department for Education and Employment, the Department of Health and other arms of government will be maintained. I used to say that any number of ambulances or health services could to little in the face of the deaths and injuries on the roads.

I pay tribute to my close and hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley). It is true, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield said, that those who become preoccupied with road safety tend to have a sharp concentration on the subject. Attitudes have changed, and my hon. Friend is entitled to a considerable degree of credit for that.

I shall speak about a constituency issue. Road safety—the well-being of people passing through my constituency—is an ever-greater problem. In a debate yesterday, the Minister for Transport in London said that, in the face of growing congestion, there were three options:

"first, to make better use of existing infrastructure; secondly, to manage demand; and thirdly, to provide new infrastructure."—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 225.]

Hindhead on the A3 is at the centre of a major strategic route between London and Portsmouth. The entire road is now dualled, except for the 4.1 miles in my constituency. The hon. Lady and the House will realise that, with Portsmouth being the second busiest international passenger port in the country, and with the efforts to regenerate Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight and the consequent economic pressures, there is growing anxiety about the danger in the Hindhead area.

Legislation, speed cameras, road humps and all the other measures that make such a difference in many situations will have no impact at Hindhead. The Government are conducting a review of trunk roads. They also have a consultation exercise on integrated transport

strategies. I hope that those reviews will consider the interests of road safety and economic regeneration in constituencies that are not my own, but are part of the region. It is a cross-party issue, and I am confident that, had we alerted them, the Liberal and Labour Members representing Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight would have been with me today, because they feel as strongly on the matter. I hope that the Minister will add her contribution from the road safety perspective to the arguments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) kindly visited my constituency recently. He was inundated by individuals who were complaining about the danger to passengers, pedestrians and road users in all the associated villages—in Milford, Witley, Grayswood, Thursley, Tilford, Shottermill and Beacon Hill. Throughout my constituency, there is deep alarm that the rural areas are being used as rat runs, with growing numbers of incidents.

When I met representatives of the National Farmers Union recently, the crucial issue that they raised was the danger to their members from the growing volume and speed of traffic on the A3, and the lack of alternatives.

I congratulate the Government on articulating their commitment to economic opportunities, prosperity and the gateway to Europe. However, if that results in ever-larger lorries, greater congestion and more traffic of all sorts using our roads, it will be a tragedy if, on every occasion that the Minister is asked to comment on the A3 at Hindhead, it is in relation to another death or serious injury. The area has critical landscape value of international significance, and there are also economic arguments in favour of the scheme. I am waiting for an opportunity to meet the Deputy Prime Minister with an all-party delegation in order to spell out those arguments.

My constituency has traditionally been a resting place between London and Portsmouth. Horses and carriages used to stop at various inns in the area. As a result, there are many extremely good pubs which are—thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West—also selling alcohol-free beer. I would hate my constituency to become known as people's final resting place between London and Portsmouth. Unless there is an announcement about the A3 tunnel at Hindhead, I fear that that may happen.

10.30 am

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on introducing the debate. He made some pertinent points. If I were to make any adverse comment about his speech, it would be that he stopped short of developing his argument about the growing concern about those who drive while under the influence of drugs. There must be scope for making a breakthrough in that area similar to that made previously in relation to those who drive under the influence of alcohol. I hope that the Government will respond to the increasing pleas from all quarters for action on that front.

Mr. Kidney: In fairness to me, I think that I am correct in saying that the Department is funding a three-year study into the effects of the consumption of illegal drugs on road deaths. That study has been under way for only one year. What I said about the consumption of drugs was based on the first year's figures. As my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) said, we must move forward on the basis of scientific evidence and research, but the relevant research is not yet complete. If I stopped short in advancing my argument, I did so because we are short on evidence.

Mr. Chope: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but we must increase public awareness of the dangers associated with driving while under the influence of drugs. Many people do not seem to be too worried about it.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) for his typically sage comments. He and the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) pleaded for the Government to concentrate on practical measures that work, which I am sure strikes a chord with everyone concerned about the issue. The Road Traffic Act 1991—my hon. Friend did much work preparing for it—has been the backbone of many changes that have given new powers to the police and local authorities to improve road safety. My hon. Friend reminded the House of the difficulty involved in persuading the Home Office to give local authorities the power to enforce and recover fines for illegal parking. That great battle in Whitehall was eventually won and we are now seeing the benefits of that victory.

There is a plea coming through today's debate for the same sort of imagination to be applied to the conflict between the local desire for more speed cameras and the standard response that the police cannot afford them and that more speed cameras will result in additional costs that must be borne by local people. If the revenue from penalties imposed for speed infringements went to local authorities rather than into the Consolidated Fund, authorities could make progress and invest in more road speed cameras just as they are investing in improved parking enforcement arrangements in London and other towns and cities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley), whose constituency I took great pleasure in visiting again recently, pleaded for action regarding the A3 Hindhead bypass. I hope that the Government will listen to her pleas. There is no point in having trunk roads with bottlenecks, such as occur at Hindhead. Bottlenecks affect the operation of the whole route and cause people to divert onto other routes. Action must be taken in that regard.

The Government have inherited a fine legacy of sustained road casualty reduction. This country has the safest roads in Europe. There were fewer road deaths in the United Kingdom in 1996 than in any year since records began in 1926. The number of drink-related road deaths has more than halved in 18 years and there has been a substantial reduction in both deaths and serious injuries. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) for paying tribute to the success of the previous Government in that area.

Despite that success, there is still much to do. I shall concentrate on what must be done at a local level, because that is where the biggest impact can be made. Local road safety schemes were encouraged by the previous Government. It is estimated that 1,500 casualties and 200 deaths have been saved each year since 1991 as a result of the investment of £170 million in local safety schemes.

With local safety improvements, good road maintenance is also important for road safety and casualty reduction. It is estimated that between 100 and 200

[Mr. Chope]

accidents every week are related to road surface defects. It also appears that the number of such defects is increasing rather reducing. Between 100 and 200 road accidents a week are caused by defective road signs and traffic signals. Again, the number of defective road signs and signals is increasing. More than 1,000 accidents a week involve skidding. The Transport Research Laboratory estimates that well-maintained, high-skid-resistant surfaces can halve the number of wet-weather accidents. Speed often contributes to such accidents, but let us not ignore the fact that the road surface can also play a significant part.

The message is that good road safety and casualty reduction cost money. I have one question for the Minister, which I hope she will answer today: will she guarantee that local authorities will receive no less money for highway maintenance and road safety schemes next year than they are receiving this year? That is not a very strong demand; we are not asking for more funds—although obviously every hon. Member in the Chamber would like more expenditure in that area. Local authorities and those concerned about road safety locally fear that there will be a significant cut in the resources available for highway maintenance and road safety schemes next year. I hope that the hon. Lady will be able to allay their concerns.

Privately financed local schemes are related to that issue. Essex and Dorset county councils, to name but two, have invested substantial resources in developing imaginative and innovative private finance initiative schemes for roads for which they are responsible. Essex county council has been promoting the Southend-Chelmsford road scheme. Six fatal accidents have been suffered on that road during the past 18 months. Tremendous road safety benefits will result from road improvements, but I am concerned that the Department—perhaps at the behest of the hon. Lady or of her noble Friend the Minister for Roads—has sent back those schemes. I hope that the hon. Lady will assure the House today that they have not been sent back in order to delay Government expenditure on roads, which seems to be part of Labour policy. Delaying decisions saves money, but it is done at the expense of casualty reduction.

I know that there is a parliamentary briefing today on the completion of the A66 in North Yorkshire. A county councillor, Michael Heseltine—no relation to my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine)—is leading a deputation seeking a commitment from the Government on further action on and investment in the A66, again making the point that the dualling of that road would enhance and improve road safety and ensure casualty reduction.

There is plenty for the Minister to get to grips with, but if she gives resources to local authorities they can continue to make important safety improvements such as those that have played a critical part in the overall success of this country, which is the envy of road safety experts throughout the world.

10.40 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) on securing this Adjournment debate and affording the House the opportunity to discuss the important issue of road safety.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House made interesting and informed speeches. The only slightly sour note came from the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), who made a somewhat half-hearted attempt to make a party political point on local authority funding. He asked questions that he knows I am in no position to answer at this stage, and which are bitterly ironic given that, year on year, the previous Administration cut local authority funding for the very issues that he now deems essential.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman) for his kind welcome. I must tell him that hon. Members who express concerns on road safety are not deemed odd by me, my Department or the Government, and his informed and detailed contribution to the debate confirms us in our judgment.

The United Kingdom has one of the best road safety records in the world. We have not reached this position by accident or as a result of some special trait in the British character but by hard work and careful planning over several decades. Thirty years ago, almost 8,000 people were killed on our roads each year. The death toll has now fallen to less than half that number—around 3,600. I pay tribute to my noble Friend Baroness Castle who, as Minister of Transport, laid the foundations for so much that has followed. It was she who in 1967 introduced the 80 mg drink-drive limit and the breathalyser—an act of great political courage at the time—the 70 mph speed limit on motorways, the goods vehicle operator licensing system and many other vital reforms.

However, it is unacceptable that we still have around 10 road deaths a day—a toll which would rightly be deemed scandalous if it occurred in almost any other transport mode. We are determined to bring down the number of these avoidable deaths and are working on a long-term target for 2010 and a strategy to achieve it.

In 1987, a target was set: to reduce by a third road traffic casualties by the year 2000 compared with the average for 1981 to 1985. Progress has been good. In 1996, deaths on the road had reduced by 36 per cent. to 3,598, and serious casualties by 40 per cent. to 44,473. The total number of casualties, however, has remained the same—about 320,000—but traffic volumes have risen by 50 per cent. since 1981 to 1985. The chance of being slightly injured in a road accident has gone down by a quarter and of being killed or seriously injured by nearly two thirds, but we cannot be complacent.

It was therefore announced on 15 October that the Government will set a new road safety target for beyond the turn of the century. Work is in hand to consider what new measures might be productive in terms of casualty reduction and to recommend a target figure and a coherent road safety strategy within which that reduction can be achieved. An announcement is planned for the latter half of 1998. Progress towards the new target will be monitored every three years so that the assumptions made when the target was set can be re-examined. The process will take full account of our policies on walking, cycling and public transport, reflecting the Government's work on an integrated transport policy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford clearly stated his concerns about drink-driving when he highlighted its tragic consequences in the case of his constituent, whom I will have the pleasure and privilege of meeting later

today. The campaign against drink-driving, sustained since the mid-1970s, has reduced the number of deaths in which illegal alcohol levels were a factor to around a third of the level when the campaign started. I can assure the House that we shall launch another hard-hitting Christmas campaign on 2 December. However, about three years ago, the steady improvement in the drink-drive figures seemed to bottom out and we are actively looking at ways to give it a further push. We have been listening carefully to road safety organisations and looking at research on measures taken in other parts of the world.

Among the issues is whether the 80 mg limit, set in 1967, is still appropriate. The basic evidence of risk has been refined by later research, but not fundamentally changed. Public opinion towards the drink-driver has changed a great deal and much of that change is due to the very successful campaigning by my Department and its predecessors. Most heartening is the attitude of teenage drivers, who take a far more responsible view than I recall from those of my generation. Unfortunately, however, that sense of responsibility is not reflected by drivers in their 20s, who are disproportionately involved in drink-drive accidents. It is at that group that most recent Government campaigns have been targeted.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) referred to boy racers. The Road Traffic (New Drivers) Act 1995 provides that should a new driver amass six points on their licence they will lose it and will have to pass the test again.

We must not deceive ourselves that a lower limit would solve all the problems. Half of those convicted by the courts were driving at levels at least twice the current limit, so there are several issues to address, besides the limit itself.

I noted carefully what my hon. Friend said about random breath testing and see the attractions of it, but I am not sure that there is any persuasive evidence that powers to test randomly would mean better enforcement. The Association of Chief Police Officers is not seeking a power to conduct breath tests at random. That, it argues, would be a waste of resources. It does, however, recommend breath testing after all injury accidents, and all forces now do that. Roadside tests now number 780,000 a year. The Association of Chief Police Officers has for many years sought a general power to conduct breath tests that would target the hard core of persistent drink-drivers. It is clear, therefore, that we must look carefully at whether we can improve the effectiveness of police powers.

Existing legislation provides the courts with a comprehensive set of measures and penalties to deal with drink-drivers. A drink-drive conviction almost invariably results in automatic disqualification for a minimum of 12 months. For a second conviction within 10 years, the minimum period of disqualification is increased to three years. Those who are convicted with alcohol levels of at least two and a half times the legal limit must present themselves for medical assessment before being pronounced fit to hold a driving licence again. The courts have powers to require convicted drink-drivers to become "learners" again for a period following the end of the disqualification and to order interim disqualification where there is an adjournment before sentencing.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: I know that these issues go beyond the Minister's Department, but will the Government be open about the debate between Departments on the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Stafford, which is supported on both sides of the House, that when someone has been arrested for being over the limit or for refusing to take a test they should automatically lose their licence unless they get a positive approval from a court that they should not until the case is heard? Open government would help the rest of us to know the debates within government.

Ms Jackson: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I can assure him that one of the benchmarks of this Government is the drive that Departments should communicate with each other. I shall certainly raise the point that he has made. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that someone who has been charged with an offence is not a convicted person. I understand, of course, the hon. Gentleman's concern that a driver who has been charged may continue to drive until his or her case is heard. The answer is to ensure that cases come before the courts speedily. The Government are working on proposals to reduce delays throughout the criminal justice system.

Hon. Members have taken up the issue of driving under the influence of drugs. It is correct that the Government are funding an inquiry that will examine the matter.

Speed is of particular concern to my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and other hon. Members. We have made enormous progress on drink-driving; combating excessive and inappropriate speed is now the major challenge. Last year, about 3,600 people were killed and 320,000 injured in road accidents. Speed is a major factor in an estimated one third of all road accidents. But for people driving too fast for the conditions, more than 1,000 people might still be alive and 100,000 might not be suffering injuries, many of which are serious and permanent.

This is not exclusively a matter of reducing speed limits; we must get drivers to obey existing limits. There exists a wide variety of measures to persuade or prevent drivers from exceeding speed limits. They all help to reduce accidents and casualties. The long-term solution, however, must be to change our attitude to speed. Speed is not glamorous, not desirable and not sensible. It can kill and maim. That is why my noble Friend Baroness Hayman recently launched our kill your speed campaign—to make us aware of the potential consequences of exceeding speed limits.

Mr. Sheerman: I welcome the kill your speed initiative, but, at the same time, there is a great accent on speed in the advertising, especially on television, of new cars. We must do everything that we can, including approaching the Advertising Standards Authority, to reduce the impact of such advertising. We constantly read or hear of cars accelerating from standstill to 100 mph in a few seconds and being great performers at 120 mph. It is essential that we tackle the advertisers.

Ms Jackson: My hon. Friend makes a valid point and it is one which I have had occasion to raise with car manufacturers in the past. Their consideration of the points that I was making was quite marked. I can make no promises, but the manufacturers are listening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford mentioned the effectiveness of speed enforcement cameras. Experience shows that they are most effective at sites with a history

[Ms Jackson]

of speed-related accidents. Drivers tend to slow down for the cameras and speed up again once past them. Where it is necessary to reduce traffic speeds along a series of roads, cameras are less likely to succeed than, for example, traffic-calming measures.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of the ability of highway authorities and enforcement agencies to place more cameras. There is a long-standing principle that money from court fines goes to the Consolidated Fund, from which it is not generally possible to divert money to fund enforcement costs.

A simple solution that is often suggested is to decriminalise speeding. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford presented other ideas for raising additional funds. At a time when we are highlighting the dangers and terrible consequences of speed, we believe that decriminalisation would send out the wrong message. I can assure my hon. Friend that, with Home Office colleagues, we are examining the funding arrangements for cameras to ascertain whether there is a way to make better use of existing cameras and increase their use where needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) expressed concern about the speeds at which vehicles are driven near schools, a concern which the Government and, I am sure, all hon. Members share. Finding ways to reduce speeds and accidents around our schools is vital in taking forward the Labour party's manifesto commitment to improve road safety for school children. It is an increasingly common view that roads adjacent to schools should have 20 mph speed limits. The view is promoted for the best of all possible reasons, but drivers, as I have had occasion to observe, do not always respect speed limits. To be successful, therefore, 20 mph limits should be supported by traffic calming, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington said.

It makes sense to adopt a local zoning approach. A proper 20 mph zone with supporting traffic-calming features is much more likely to be effective in reducing speeds and, therefore, accidents.

One of our concerns is that an increasing number of parents are driving their children to and from school. The results of surveys tell us that the number of children being driven to school has doubled in the past 20 years and that journeys to school now account for one in six cars. We understand why parents want to drive their children to school. They think that children will be safer in the car than on the pavement, and our record on child pedestrian casualties adds weight to that argument. It is, however, a vicious circle; the more children are driven to school, the more traffic there is on the roads and the higher is the risk to child pedestrians. We must find a way to make routes to school safe for children so that they can walk and cycle and to encourage parents to allow them to do so.

Many schools and local authorities throughout the country already have school travel plans in place. Many more are working with parents, governors and children to find a solution that is safe and works for the school. The charity SUSTRANS designs and builds routes for cyclists, walkers and people with disabilities. It has set up a safe routes to school demonstration project with 10 schools in various parts of the country. It is essential that child safety is always a priority. It is not only walking and cycling which we wish to encourage. When children live too far away from school to walk, there may be suitable bus services that will avoid the need to drive.

My Department has provided research funds for two projects that involve examining how to reduce the number of children being driven to school. We shall embark on further research in this area. We shall also examine journey types as part of the fundamental review of transport to consider how we can make walking and cycling to school realistic and safe options for our children. These are serious and complex, but vital, issues.

I assure the right hon. Member for South–West Surrey (Mrs. Bottomley) that road safety is central to our White Paper on integrated transport. The concerns of her constituents are replicated throughout the country. That is why the Government are determined to put in place measures that will continue to decrease the number of people who suffer death or injury on our roads.

Agriculture (Wales)

10.57 am

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): In seeking the debate, my colleagues and I were fulfilling an undertaking that we made during the summer recess when, of course, we were all on holiday, as the Minister knows. At meetings with farmers, we promised them that we would raise in Parliament, as soon as it reconvened, the grievous crisis that is besetting the farming community in Wales and, by extension, the grievous crisis that is affecting the entire rural community. That was our undertaking and I am glad to be able to fulfil it.

Farming in general is under pressure these days, but it is generally accepted and well understood that the crisis is worst of all in the hills, and 80 per cent. of Welsh farm land is in the hills and so officially categorised as being among the less-favoured areas.

It is legendary that farmers always complain, and there is something in that. It is fair to say, however, that they are not unique in that. It is important to understand that the situation now is different. I cannot remember a time when there was such profound gloom, such pessimism and so little laughter among farmers. Their complaints these days are not shot through with satire and teasing as they have been in the past. They are genuinely pessimistic and gloomy.

Farmers fear for their livelihoods and for their very survival. More radically, they foresee the loss of a way of life. They ask specifically whether the new Labour Government care about farming and about the countryside, by which I do not mean just the landscape, which is terribly important, or wildlife and biodiversity, which is even more important, but the countryside, its people and its communities. Do the new Government care? That is the issue.

Farmers' minds remain open, especially in Wales, where many of them are part of the non-Tory majority. It is important for the Government to understand that political point. In Ceredigion, by far the majority of farmers are among the non-Tory majority. The Labour party should bear that in mind, because at some time it may need their practical support, albeit indirectly through other parties. Farmers are rapidly coming to the conclusion that the Government do not care: that is what they believe, and will say so.

The Government are on trial, and their credibility is at stake. If they care, they must show that they care. For a range of reasons, Plaid Cymru hopes that they will show by their actions that they care.

Let us make no mistake about it: there is a real crisis. Not since the war have so many things gone so badly wrong at the same time. A combination of problems is pressing down on farmers. Beef prices are worse than they were last year due to the continuing effect of the BSE crisis and the export ban, and the effect of a strong pound.

The strong pound has depressed prices across all sectors of Welsh agriculture. The high prices of lamb last year partly compensated for the low beef prices, although not all farmers keep both sheep and beef cattle. The strong pound does not affect prices only by disadvantaging exports and facilitating imports; it also significantly reduces the value of European support payments, so it has a double effect.

Farmers feel that whatever they do, they cannot win. Higher lamb prices in early 1996 led last year to a reduced sheep annual premium, but lower lamb prices this year will not lead to an increase in that premium, because it is calculated on the European Union average price for the whole year, which this year is high. Welsh hill farmers receive a double whammy: United Kingdom prices are lower because of the strong pound, and Welsh hill prices are lower still, even though the product that farmers bring to market is first rate, because lambs do not come to market until later in the year when prices are lower. By all accounts, SAP payments will be down and not up next year.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does my hon. Friend accept that in 1995–96, as many as 40 per cent. of Welsh cattle and sheep farmers in less-favoured areas—where 80 per cent. of Welsh farmland is located—had incomes of less than £10,000? That was with the higher prices to which he referred, so the prospects for this year are devastating.

Mr. Dafis: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) for making that point. Income levels this year are certainly significantly lower than £10,000. On top of the problems that I have already described, there has been a sharp reduction—about 20 per cent.—in the price of milk, partly due to the strong pound. Worst of all, that reduction has coincided with Milk Marque's new collection charge system. We understand why Milk Marque introduced it, although its detail is questionable.

The combination of the reduction in price and the new collection charge system is driving farmers with up to 40 or more milking cows out of milk production while they can cut their losses. They have been driven out peremptorily, because they are losing money in production. The holdings that cease milk production will remain for a while producing beef and sheepmeat, thus exacerbating the problems in those sectors, until they are absorbed into ever-larger holdings, adding a further twist to the spiral of decline in our rural communities.

There is also the possibility of quota moving out of parts of Wales. The Welsh Office should keep a careful eye on that.

Farming unions reckon that 69 per cent. of farms in less-favoured areas in Wales have a net farm income of less than £10,000 a year: 80 per cent. of agricultural land in Wales is in less-favoured areas. Interest payments and reinvestment must be funded from net farm income, which leaves precious little on which to live.

It is small wonder that the results of a recent National Farmers Union survey were depressing for the prospects of hill farmers. It found that 64 per cent. of hill farmers are over 50, and of them, 18 per cent. are over 60: so it is an aging population. Of those who responded to the survey, 82 per cent. had children, and 43 per cent. of them stated that their children would not take over the running of the farm after them. There is a strong prospect of a mass exodus.

The reasons given by young people for not taking up farming were income levels, 74 per cent.; lack of long-term stability, 48 per cent.; and long working hours, 50 per cent. It is difficult to do anything about the last factor, because farmers have always lived with long

[Mr. Dafis]

working hours. However, it would make a big difference if the first two factors were tackled. It is the combination of factors which young people find so depressing.

The evidence shows that there is a real danger that farming in the less-favoured areas could go into steep decline. The problem is as serious as that. No wonder farmers are depressed. Unlike us, they see at first hand this decline taking place each and every day.

The effects of such a decline on social and cultural life, including the Welsh language, which we must bear in mind all the time, on the natural environment in rural Wales, which requires people to maintain it—we should make no mistake about that—and on the economic vitality of rural areas, would be far reaching and deeply harmful. Farmers and their children contribute enormously to the economic vitality of rural areas. We cannot afford to lose the tradition of entrepreneurialism not just in farming, but in other sectors of the economy.

We should also consider the loss of the complex and invaluable inherited skills of farming communities that cannot easily be recreated. A series of national vocational qualifications or even a degree in agriculture does not make a farmer. That skill is inherited: it is intricate, complex and rich. In 15 or 20 years, if not sooner, we may rue the loss of those skills. I am sure that in 15 years' time we will need people in agriculture more than we do now.

In that context, farmers see a Government who are not even seeking to stabilise the situation, let alone launch a rescue operation. They see a Government who want to grind them down even further. Cuts in over-30-months scheme compensation have led to a reduction in receipts from barren cows—an important part of milk farmers' income—of 60 per cent., with average prices down from £760 last year to £311 this year.

The Government are refusing to take advantage of European Union compensation for sterling revaluation, although all other eligible EU countries have done so. Ireland has just delivered top-up support for BSE-affected farmers to the tune of £17 million—£50 per beef animal. Farmers are asking whether that is fair competition in a free and open market, and, clearly, the answer is no.

Of immediate relevance is the Ministry of Agriculture's pre-empting of the outcome of this year's review of hill livestock compensatory allowances by freezing payments at 1996 levels, and its cancellation of the supplement paid last year in recognition of the BSE crisis, which amounted to some £9.6 million for Wales and £60 million for the United Kingdom as a whole.

There have been successive cuts in HLCAs since 1992. Ministers did not mention that last night. Those cuts reflect doubts in Government about the validity of HLCAs as support mechanisms. Along with others who understand the position far better than I do, I disagree strongly with that perception: if we consider the other options, we conclude that HLCAs are the best.

Maintaining production in the hills is vital. Animals of the highest quality are reared extensively in the hills, and the highest welfare standards apply. Hill farming, however, labours under disadvantages, and there are few opportunities for diversification. There may well be a need for change in the way in which HLCAs are designed, particularly to strengthen modulation, in which my party believes. We should, however, be suspicious of the view of some conservationists that HLCAs have caused both social and environmental problems. HLCAs are probably the best method of maintaining stock farming in the hills, and there is every reason to support the unions' view that they should be kept and restored to their 1992 real value. We also support, as a separate issue, the view that the BSE compensation supplement should be retained.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing time for the debate. Is he aware of recent research carried out by Aberystwyth university, that austere body which I know was also attended by some Conservative Members? According to that research, for every 10 full-time jobs in upland agriculture there are some 25 in the supply industry. The crisis affects not just agriculture, but life in rural Wales as we know it. Does my hon. Friend agree with that?

Mr. Dafis: The only thing with which I might disagree is the adjective "austere". I never noticed much austerity at Aberystwyth, at least among the students.

My hon. Friend has made an important point. It is well known that one of the best ways of putting money into the rural economy is to put it into farmers' pockets, because they spend the money locally. They do not go on foreign holidays, or buy outside their areas. We should also bear in mind the complex links between agriculture and all kinds of other sectors, and the possibility of developing further links through value addition. Farmers are currently eager to consider such prospects, but it is difficult for them to do so when they are under such pressure.

I have mentioned a number of ways in which the Government could help farming at this critical time. Another way in which they could help is by applying themselves seriously to the task of lifting the beef export ban. I think that we can all agree that, whatever applied in the past, there is no longer any justification for retaining it.

I am glad that the Government are adopting the date-based export scheme, which enables animals born after 1 August 1996 to be exported. They have put that scheme on the table in Europe, alongside the certified herd scheme. The date-based scheme is far preferable to the certified herd scheme, and—given that passports are available from that date—perfectly practicable and safe.

The question is, how hard are the Government pushing the scheme? How high a priority is it in their diplomatic and negotiating activity in the European Union? In rural Wales it is a top priority, and we expect the Government to reflect that through the intensity of their lobbying. They, too, should make it a high priority. The lifting of the ban would not deliver all the results that we want overnight, but it would be a tremendously important threshold to cross, recreating abroad the confidence in beef as a product that has already been recreated in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the issue is no longer the safety of British beef—which is the safest in the world—but

marketing confidence, both in the United Kingdom and in Europe? That is what we need if we are to get our beef back on to the European market.

Mr. Dafis: Absolutely—and lifting the export ban is crucial to that.

Before I end my speech, I want to say a little about reform of the common agricultural policy. Farmers accept that CAP reform is necessary, that it is coming and that it will probably have to be radical. They accept that some of the problems besetting them, and besetting rural areas, are a consequence of the worst aspects of the CAP. The principle of environmental management payments as the main mechanism for support is gaining widespread acceptance among farmers. What is essential is that the distinctive needs of Wales, and the distinctive views of Welsh farmers, are strongly represented in the process of considering CAP reform.

The priorities of Welsh farming are not those of the south of England. Indeed, in certain cases there are conflicts of interest. For example, the Farmers Union of Wales—like Plaid Cymru—supports sensible and flexibly applied modulation: I use that dirty word again. The dominant voice of English farming does not support modulation. I want a clear commitment that, in this as in other matters, the United Kingdom Minister of Agriculture, who makes policy—not just the Secretary of State for Wales, who, by and large, is able only to influence—will listen to and take account of the voice of the people and the farmers of Wales. The time for him to start doing that is now, while discussions about CAP reform are proceeding.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Will the hon. Gentleman bear in mind the fact that there are also lowland farmers in Wales, particularly in my constituency? When the Minister of Agriculture takes the needs of farming in Wales into consideration, he should take account of all farming, not just hill farming.

Mr. Dafis: Absolutely. I dare say that there are conflicts of interest about that even within Wales at times; it is never a simple issue. We need the kind of CAP reform that will deliver good, sustainable, healthy agriculture everywhere. Specific hill-farming issues need to be considered, however, and CAP reform is relevant to those issue.

I repeat that the Government's reputation is at stake. I am glad that meetings have taken place recently, and I listened carefully to what the Secretary of State for Wales said: he recognised the existence of severe problems that might have far-reaching effects. What we want now is action, and I want to hear what that action might be.

11.18 am

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I speak as a Member who has inherited part of the former constituency of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis), so I am aware of many of the difficulties that he has mentioned.

During the past six months, I have had several meetings with farmers in my constituency to listen to their concerns. I have met groups from the two Welsh farming unions. It is interesting that only one supports modulation, so it seems that Plaid Cymru is meeting the needs only of one section of Welsh farmers. I have taken time to visit several holdings of various sizes and types, with differing sectors of interest.

The one message that comes back from all those farmers is their sheer desperation at the constant and extensive battering to which every aspect of agriculture has been subjected in the past few years. At those meetings—I am sure that the hon. Member for Ceredigion will agree about this problem—farmers also spoke of the delay between action and its impact on the rural community.

For example, the beef sector, which is of great importance to west Wales, has been struggling with the consequences of the former Government's ineptitude and bungling of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy issue since the mid-1980s. Although farmers in my constituency welcome the current Government's moves to get the ban lifted, the long-term financial and economic effects still live on.

The dairy sector has had to cope with the former Government's decision to negotiate quotas within the European Union for only 80 per cent. of United Kingdom domestic demand, while the Irish Government negotiated quotas for 120 per cent. of their domestic demand. The natural consequence has been Welsh and UK farmers sitting by, unable to produce more, while imports flood in from elsewhere to satisfy domestic need. With the additional burden to dairy farmers of Milk Marque collection charges, is it surprising that independent organisations predict that, by 2000, 50 per cent. of the UK's milk will be produced by only 7,000 major dairy farmers? In addition, arable farmers in Wales were incensed at their unequal treatment by the previous Government compared with their farming colleagues in England.

Coupled with all that is the feeling among farmers that they are being squeezed from both sides—as a result of the misfortunes suffered by the industry in recent years and, at the other end of the spectrum, by the large retail outlets that are dominating markets and reducing even further farmers' diminishing capacity to make a living. There is no doubt that that is exemplified in the National Farmers Union's national survey of hill farming published this week, to which the hon. Member for Ceredigion referred. Sixty-four per cent. of farmers who replied to the survey were over 50 years of age and 18 per cent. were over 60 years of age. Eighty-two per cent. had children, but 43 per cent. of those said that their children would not be taking over the running of the farm when they retired.

That is worrying enough in general terms, but in Wales those facts have even wider cultural and social implications than in other parts of the UK. The rural economy throughout the UK is underpinned by agriculture. In addition in Wales, culturally and linguistically, unique communities rely on the economic success of agriculture. Therefore, when our farmers suffer, it threatens the very fabric of Wales's individuality.

Of particular concern to me and my constituents is the fate of hill farmers. Only two weeks ago, I visited a 200-acre hill farm in my constituency and heard the plight of the 40 per cent. of hill farmers in Wales's less-favoured areas whose net incomes are less than £10,000 a year.

[Ms Jackie Lawrence]

None of the children of the group of farmers whom I spoke to were entering farming; they were seeking employment in other sectors with better earning potential.

In my maiden speech, I said that there was an exodus of 11.54 per cent. of young males aged 16 to 24 out of the county, but, at the same time, an influx of 27.6 per cent. of males aged over 65. That has already had an impact. If it is unchecked, areas such as west Wales will eventually exist simply as areas of recreation and retirement for people who have spent their economically active lives elsewhere.

The new Government have already made bold and positive moves that will secure the future of a living countryside, thereby showing their commitment to halt the decline. As has been mentioned, action by the Minister to end the beef ban is welcome. Before the election earlier this year, Labour was the only UK political party to send a delegate to the conference on rural development to seek positive ways to revitalise our rural community. The new Welsh Assembly at last offers real opportunities for Welsh farmers and rural communities to have their voices and specific demands addressed regionally.

All those policies show a firm commitment to preserving and enhancing rural communities and the agricultural basis on which they depend, but they will all take time to implement. In the meantime, many of our farmers are suffering unwarranted hardship and financial crises. I ask the Minister to examine ways, as has been done in health and education, of providing more short-term financial assistance to our farmers, if that is at all possible, within the Government's sensible and stabilising long-term policies, both to address the neglect of 18 years of Conservative Government and to ensure that

"with safe land in sight—the ship does not sink before it gains the shore".

11.25 am

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence). She has been doing her homework in visiting farms in her constituency, which is the best way to find out precisely what is going on. I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) for raising this topic, which is vital in my constituency, a mainly farming area, with up to 25 per cent. of the population dependent on farming in one way or another.

Hill farms, upland farms, small dairy farms and smallholdings have all been badly hit, particularly in the past two years or so. Upland farms, which come between hill farms and lowland farms, have a less robust support system than some of the hill farms, and they have been particularly badly hit, and—I say this as an agriculturist—the push factors out of farming are acute.

Between 1992 and 1997, hill livestock compensatory allowances were cut twice by the Conservative Government. Those HLCAs are in the less-favoured areas and are a social support mechanism. They are vital for maintaining people in the hills and uplands. Clearly, that is crucial in areas of Wales such as my constituency, where practically nowhere is less than 400 ft above sea level.

The previous Government muddled the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis with HLCA payments. They used the HLCA mechanism to add on a special one-off £60 million payment. Fair enough, the money was needed, but it was for only one year. The present Government are religiously cloning the previous Government's budget and now we have a crisis. I sincerely hope that that budget will be consolidated and changed into HLCA payments.

The rise of the pound against the European currency unit of 20 per cent. has created huge problems, particularly in terms of the reduction in ewe premiums of up to 40 per cent. We do not have to be magical mathematicians to realise that if a farmer has a 600-ewe flock and the ewe premiums have gone down from approximately £20 to £12, that is a big loss for that farmer.

For small upland dairy farms, there are lower cull cow prices as a result of the over-30-months-scheme weight limits and lower milk prices. Smallholdings are in crisis as well. Farmers have occasionally cried wolf when the situation has not been as serious, but it is really serious now, and all the farms to which I refer are family units.

In the current financial year, one county council smallholding in my constituency will be £19,500 down on the previous financial year. It is not difficult to see where that is coming from—the reduction in milk prices of £13,500; the reduction in barren cow prices of £3,000; and the reduction in calf sales of £3,000, all in the past 12 months. It is not this Government's fault; it is the result of all sorts of things that happened under the previous Government. We have a major crisis on our hands. The farm comprises only 50 acres, but three children have been reared there. Now, the farmer rightly says that this is the worst crisis in agriculture since the 1930s, and I do not think that that is an overstatement.

One particular plea to the Minister is to chivvy up his Department and get the ewe premium payments expedited. Many farmers in Wales have not received them; they would make a big difference to them on the threshold of winter. The previous Government cut staffing, so it has taken a long time to expedite the payments.

I recently visited three farms in the famous area of Beulah. The Beulah ewe is known worldwide as a first-rate breeding ewe. It is the dam of the Welsh mule. The farmers whom I visited enjoy a fantastic vista across to the Cambrian mountains. We could see nine family farms spread out in front of us, but only two of them had sons who could carry on the business. That is a major crisis.

One farmer I visited had two daughters, one of whom had worked on the farm—but even she, as a professional shepherd, had left because she could earn more money working as a shepherd in Wiltshire than she could earn on the family farm. As the hon. Member for Ceredigion said, net farm incomes are too low to support two people. Indeed, the Welsh farm management survey has forecast a reduction of 40 per cent. in farm incomes in the current financial year. That is a huge crisis for farmers. Young farmers are not prepared to stay at home and live on a poverty wage. Who can blame them? But that means that the countryside will rapidly depopulate. We have already heard this morning statistics on the average age of farmers in upland Wales.

The all-Wales agri-environmental scheme is about to be introduced, and the Liberal Democrats welcome that. However, it appears that it will not be as well financed as the pilot Tir Cymen scheme. It is vital that the overall income used for production purposes on our upland farms is compensated for in the agri-environmental scheme. There must be no less money coming in to support our family units.

The whole rural economy is in crisis. The powerhouse agency must have a sound and thrusting strategy for small businesses. It must ensure that rural families have sufficient income from off-farm activities as well as from on-farm activities. There is the whole question of changes from 5b funding to objective 2. I understand that a great deal of 5b money has not been claimed in Wales, and we must get access to that.

What are the solutions to the problems that I have outlined? We must have the £60 million BSE payment—which was one-off—incorporated into HLCAs. The HLCAs must be restored to their 1992 levels, before the Tories cut them, plus inflation. We have to secure green pound compensation, which will greatly assist the impact on the ewe premium and on milk prices. We must raise the weight limits on the over-30-months scheme. We must take up the European Union retirement scheme, which the previous Government would not do. I well remember the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), in a previous decade, saying that he would not touch it. He was wrong to take that view.

We must adopt the European Union's scheme for young farmers, which gives them access to funding, so that they can obtain working capital to help them make a start on their farms. We must ensure that the Agenda 2000 proposals take into account an element of modulation on a UK basis and, indeed, on a Welsh basis, to support family units.

Clearly, we must ensure that the beef export ban is lifted, and we must prevent sub-standard beef imports. That would be an important move. In the beef industry, many livestock farmers would like additional support for beef heifers coming off upland farms. The price for heifers is rock bottom. A real crisis confronts family farms in upland Wales. When I talked to farmers, as I did over the summer, I was told that they were having to sell their beef herds because they could not make them pay. That leaves only one enterprise in our hills—sheep. That is a real crisis.

11.35 am

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) on securing time for this important debate. I welcome the contributions of the hon. Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) and for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). Many of the points of real concern to the agriculture industry have already been aired. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire referred to the crisis surrounding entrants into the industry.

One major concern is that the average age of people in the agriculture industry is steadily rising. Young people no longer want to come into the industry. Therefore, packages to support young farmers are important. I think in particular of pensions and of the European Union schemes. When I visited France with the Select Committee on Agriculture, I found young farmers from Wales taking up the offers available in that country. They could not stay in Wales because there was nothing on offer.

The immediate crisis facing the industry in Wales must be set against the background of continuing concern about the viability of the industry in general. Indeed, we need to look at the viability of the whole rural economy. It is important to put the debate into the context of the employment crisis, but that must be set against the background facing the rural economy year on year. We cannot look at agriculture in isolation—it must be part of an integrated rural strategy, bringing the strands together. If the economic powerhouse is to make a real impact in rural Wales, it must ensure that the integrated approach is uppermost in its policy.

Although agriculture faces major problems, it is still the major player in the economy of rural Wales. We have heard eloquent speeches, from both sides of the House, about the immediate crisis facing the industry. For example, we heard about the problems surrounding the strength of the pound; the green pound and its effect on commodity support; the BSE crisis and the previous Government's refusal—and, so far, the refusal of this Government—to ask the European Union for additional support; the reduction of support through the over-30-months scheme; and the continuing ban on exports.

I am pleased that certain moves have been made to resolve the crisis. If the Government secure a raising of the ban on beef exports, that will boost confidence and aid the marketing strategy of the beef sector. That should be an immediate aim.

We have also heard much about hill livestock compensatory allowance payments. There is no immediate prospect of an increase in those payments. Farmers are aware that although prices have been frozen this year, the prospect is that they will be frozen again next year. A freeze is likely, because the Government have adopted for at least two years the previous Administration's spending plans.

Unless Ministers are prepared to consider switching money from other budgets in the Welsh Office, farmers face the prospect that HLCA payments will again be frozen next year. The effect of such a freeze on farmers in difficult areas will be devastating. This year, therefore, farmers are making the case that the review should be a real one and should not be conducted against a background of frozen payments.

Current pressures on the industry are adding to the underlying problems that it faces. There are two major concerns on the horizon—common agricultural policy reforms and Agenda 2000, and the World Trade Organisation talks. We must consider how the industry will be supported, because it must be supported. People from every part of the political spectrum realise that agriculture cannot survive without support in some areas in Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. The nature of support for the industry will change over time, but it must have support.

For all types of reasons, Plaid Cymru Members support the shift from headage payments to agri-environmental payments, although we place some caveats on that support. First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion made clear, agri-environmental payments

[Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones]

must be regarded as part of a package rather than as the entire answer. Commodity support—added to the agri-environmental part of the equation—must be retained in one form or another.

Secondly, the Government must show clearly that they are committed to keeping their side of the bargain. Let us acknowledge the fact that, currently, the European Union finances 100 per cent. of commodity support. The problem with agri-environmental payments is that they must be co-financed. Based on the record of recent Governments, however, we cannot rely on European payments being co-financed. Whenever European Union support required matching income, the Conservative Government refused to do it properly. The result has been that farmers in other parts of the European Union receive co-financed support, annually giving them greater income buoyancy.

A question that Ministers will have to answer is whether they will ensure that a shift to an all-Wales agri-environmental scheme is properly financed. We should remember that the Tir Cymen pilot scheme has been largely successful, building on the previous environmentally sensitive area schemes—some of which were successful, although others were not. Although the results of ESA schemes have been patchy, the Tir Cymen scheme has built on their successes and examined the possibilities of co-farm management.

The Tir Cymen scheme has been generally successful because it was targeted; the available pot of money was not spread too thinly and it dealt with only one geographical area. The problem with an all-Wales scheme is that, unless the Government realise that more money must go into the system, only one of two options will be available. The first option is that the butter will have to be spread more thinly, which—because there will be no incentive—will deter many farmers from entering the system. The second option is to prevent some farmers from entering the scheme.

An all-Wales scheme can work in only one of those two ways. The real fear among Welsh farmers is that the second option will prevail, and that the rules will be rigged to prevent some farmers from joining the scheme. Many farmers believe that such an outcome is likely, although I hope that Ministers will convince hon. Members that it is not.

The point made earlier in the debate about CAP reform was well taken, because such reform must be made. I am sure that all hon. Members believe that allowing 80 per cent. of the aid to go to 20 per cent. of farmers is a grotesque situation. I should tell the hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire that Plaid Cymru Members support modulation, because we believe that help must be targeted. We support modulation not to ensure that those with large farms continue to fill their pockets with European money, but to ensure that the Welsh traditional family farm receives targeted support and that cuts under CAP reform do not disproportionately hit small family farms. Most farmers in Wales share those objectives. In targeting aid, we shall not only reduce the CAP budget but ensure that farmers who really need help receive it in the most beneficial form.

HLCA payments have always been regarded as socio-economic payments, assisting farmers who farm in difficult areas. There is even a system within HLCAs that distinguishes specially disadvantaged areas from disadvantaged areas. HLCA payments have always been made on the basis that more assistance should be given in the areas where it is more difficult to farm. Over the years, many people have examined different systems of providing such support, but no one has yet devised a better one. Everyone has been forced back to the conclusion that the current system is the fairest way in which to provide money. Although I realise that we might have to re-examine the current system to ensure that it is properly targeting payments, it is broadly accepted by the industry.

The Government's decision to freeze HLCA payments this year is no different from the decision made by the previous Government. I remember so well hearing an agriculture Minister say at a sitting of the Select Committee on Agriculture, "Of course, we shall have to consider reducing HLCA payments to farmers in years in which their incomes go up. That must be seen not as support in the traditional sense, but as support when incomes are low. Payments are increased when farmers' incomes are low and go down when incomes rise." Over the past 10 years, however, the problem has been that payments have been cut when incomes are high, but have never been increased when incomes are low. Over the past 15 years, in real terms, HLCA payments have been eroded considerably.

By observing the lines on graphs, we know that, ultimately, HLCA payments will simply disappear. That is the obvious outcome. For many years, there has been a type of shadow-boxing in progress, in which farmers argue and lobby for greater HLCA payments. Although Ministers listen, they do not listen properly, because the payments are never increased. The payments are withering on the vine. We can predict that, in about 10 years, the value of the payments will be virtually nothing.

What is the Government's policy on HLCA payments? Do Ministers want them eventually to disappear? If so, what do they think should replace them? Everyone involved in the debate realises that if support is withdrawn, agriculture will simply cease to exist as a living industry in some areas of Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion touched on an important point when he said that we are talking not only about the economy of rural Wales but about the fabric of rural society. Hon. Members who have visited farms in rural Wales realise the difficulties facing those farms.

There is a consensus among all politicians that support is necessary. The difficulty has always been to ensure that that support comes at the right time. As it does not come at the right time, there is a continual drift from the land, and agriculture becomes an aging industry. Agricultural colleges are failing to attract students because young people no longer see agriculture as an attractive industry.

This year's crisis is immediate, and the Government need to deal with it, but I should like the Minister to give us an idea of how he sees the future of agriculture. Do the Government have any plans to attract young people into the industry in future? Do they see agriculture forming an important part of an integrated rural strategy? Do they have any real policies to breathe life back into the countryside?

11.49 am

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): I welcome the initiative of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) in securing this debate on an issue of great importance to

all the people of Wales. However, I found his remarks to the effect that the Government do not care about agriculture not only inaccurate but rather offensive, especially to Members of Parliament such as me who represent rural constituencies and who have a good relationship with the farming unions and, I am pleased to say, with the farmers themselves.

The Government have inherited an extremely difficult situation. As was outlined by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in yesterday's debate, which I know the hon. Member for Ceredigion attended, mitigation of the hardship suffered by hill farmers unfortunately has a price tag. The most realistic assessment of that price tag is that it would cost no less than £440 million this year to introduce the measures that the hon. Gentleman suggested in respect of the over-30-months scheme, revaluation of the green pound, agri-monetary compensation and so on. The remarks made by the hon. Member for Ceredigion bear the hallmark of irresponsibility, because his party will never have the opportunity to introduce legislation and will never have responsibility for the economy of the United Kingdom. It is all very well for him to press for those measures, but, realistically, given the extremely difficult situation that the Government have inherited, they are not possible.

Having said that, I urge my Government colleagues to look again at the hardship being caused, especially to hill farmers in Wales. I am prepared to accept and trust that the Government are heading in the right direction—they have a constructive dialogue with the European institutions and with the farming unions.

It is fair to say that agricultural policy is nowadays inextricably linked with European policy. If European policy is wrong, as I suggest the Opposition's policy is wrong, agricultural policy will inevitably suffer. It is of grave concern to many farmers in my constituency that the Conservative party seems so aggressive towards Europe. It has an ideological fixation or phobia about Europe, which I am afraid will harm agriculture in the long term. A great many agriculturists feel that there is benefit in a single currency or that, at the very least, it is harmful to shut out for 10 years, as the Opposition are, any possibility of joining a single currency. Fluctuating prices and instability are added features of the difficulties confronting many farmers. The Government's more pragmatic approach to European policy is to be welcomed—it means that the general approach to agriculture is far more realistic.

I welcome the Government's initiative in introducing an all-Wales agri-environmental scheme, learning from the lessons that came from the development of Tir Cymen and the environmentally sensitive area schemes. I also welcome the fact that reform of the common agricultural policy is a priority for the Government. It is essential that resources be diverted from price support in the long term. Although there is scope for price support, and I wish it to continue, in the long term there has to be movement towards environmental support and conservation. Farmers in my constituency in particular know that. I recently visited an upland farm, Plas Matw, owned by Mr. Tecwyn Evans. I must congratulate him on the conservation work, especially the protection of hedgerows, that he has undertaken with the support of the Countryside Council for Wales and the Agricultural Training Board. I welcome the Government's initiative in that respect.

The Government have inherited a difficult situation, but they have a constructive dialogue with the farming unions and the European institutions. In the long term, I expect that the hardship confronting farmers, particularly in Wales, will be mitigated. The Government have every sympathy with them, but, unfortunately, it is a very difficult time for everyone, and I am afraid that the Government have to prioritise.

11.55 am

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) for securing this debate and enabling me to make a few brief comments about family farms and smallholdings. I shall not rehearse all the arguments again, but I wish to emphasise the great importance of protecting family farms and smallholdings, not just for the present but for the foreseeable future.

My constituency, where the largest town has only 12,000 people and where there are no others with even 10,000, depends on farming and rural life not only for its culture and for a sustained economy, but for its very existence. If farming is threatened, Montgomeryshire, and places like it across Wales, will fall into serious economic decline.

The hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) made an important point about depopulation, which is being experienced all over rural Wales. Young people are tempted to leave the world of agriculture and rural life for the simple reason that it is easier to make a living and have a sustained and stable income by going to the city. According to one projection, the number of retired people will increase by 31 per cent. in some parts of mid-Wales over the next 13 or 14 years, so we have another social crisis in the offing.

Hill livestock compensatory allowances and the other payments that we have discussed need to be regarded as a form of social payment, not just as support for the agriculture industry. I counsel the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) to be a little more cautious. He accused some Opposition Members of irresponsibility because we are calling for more money. Does the hon. Gentleman not realise that many of these payments are a substitute for unemployment benefit and other direct benefits that would have to be paid if farms collapsed? Let us make no mistake about the fact that many farms and smallholdings are on the verge of collapse, for the reasons that have been outlined. I would go further and suggest that it is probably cheaper to make these payments to the agriculture industry than to pay the money through the benefits system. Farmers work hard for a living; by and large, the smallholders have to work the hardest of all.

It is clear that the continuity in terms of culture and economic survival provided by the family farm is vital to the countryside. That continuity is threatened when the sons and daughters of farmers find it easier to leave the countryside. Again, I suggest that the payments and the security that they represent are a guarantee that reassures the offspring of farmers that there is a future for them in farming.

I must mention the plight of new or young farmers coming into the business, because the enormous "in-going cost" of becoming a farmer these days has not been mentioned. We would welcome the Government giving serious consideration to ways of making it easier for new entrants to come into the agricultural market.

[Mr. Lembit Öpik]

The voice of the countryside is sometimes drowned by the shout of the city in the Chamber. Today, we have heard from hon. Members who evidently care about agriculture in Wales. I counsel the Government to take on board the points that have been made and to recognise that the issue is not saving money from the countryside, but saving the countryside. That is why we desperately require funds.

11.59 am

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) on securing it. I am delighted to be able to contribute because, as a Conservative Member for a rural English constituency, I have spoken to farmers in my constituency and in Wales many times. The Conservative party is still the second party in Wales, with 100,000 more votes than the Liberal Democrats and almost twice as many votes as Plaid Cymru at the general election.

We know how difficult times have been for hill farmers recently. More than 55 per cent. of farmers now feel that hill farming is not an attractive career option. That is very worrying. We have heard how the population, particularly in the less-favoured areas, is aging. There is a great fear that there will be nobody to take on the farms after those people. The Government have an enormous task to prove their rural credentials. They should act on four main issues to benefit rural farmers in Wales and save the industry from decline: the hill livestock compensatory allowance review; the over-30-months scheme; the revaluation of the green pound; and the lifting of the beef export ban. Those issues have all been mentioned today. Other problems include the falling price of milk, the pressure of quota and charges for carrying milk.

Labour's planned minimum wage could prove disastrous, leading to the closure of small businesses and job losses in rural Wales. We all know that farms in the less-favoured areas operate close to the margins of profitability or even below them. To afford wage costs and operate within the law, some small firms will have to shed labour. That could be a real problem. The alternative is a big increase in black market labour, without the protection of health and safety legislation. That will lead inevitably to the rundown of rural villages, as people move away to look for work. Our countryside will then decline. We have already heard that, for every job on the farm, there are at least two and a half outside.

The HLCA areas are important for the management of the countryside, for tourism in Wales and for the economic vitality of various parts of Wales. The previous Government maintained their commitment to hill farmers, paying out £107 million in HLCAs in 1995. Despite a tough Government spending round, the rates for 1996–97 were not cut. We provided an extra £60 million on HLCAs because of the effect on hill farming incomes of the BSE crisis, which is still affecting many farmers.

Ms Lawrence: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: I shall give way in a moment, but I want to build up a little head of steam first. I have only 10 minutes, because I know that the Minister will want to answer many of the points that have been raised.

The £60 million increase in payments for the 60,000 United Kingdom farmers who claimed upland livestock subsidies was announced by the then Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in November 1996.

Ms Lawrence: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm whether that £60 million was put in the spending plans that this Government took over?

Mr. Evans: The £60 million would not have been in the Government's spending plans, because nobody could have predicted the huge scale of the BSE crisis. Some £1.4 billion was spent to support the agriculture industry after the rise of BSE. We are asking the Government to consider the needs of farmers in HLCA areas carefully, to ensure that they get the support that they desperately need. The Government seem to have pre-empted the review, even though, as we know, they love reviews.

In 1995–96, HLCA payments to Welsh hill farmers reached £27.2 million. A similar figure is expected for 1996–97. Planned expenditure for the next year is £36.4 million. Labour does not share our commitment to hill farming. The Government plan to announce a cut in the HLCA back to 1996 levels, wiping out the £60 million supplement. Such a move will fail to take into account the current trends in hill farming incomes. Government figures for 1994–95 show that 69 per cent. of farmers in the less-favoured areas of Wales had a net farm income of less than £10,000—and the Government have the nerve to talk about a minimum wage.

Cuts in compensation for Welsh farmers without reference to economic conditions and incomes in the hills and the less-favoured areas will mean savings for the Government, but cuts in income for all hill farmers, putting some of them out of business. The cuts will mean deprivation and depression for many rural villages. The Government are not listening to Welsh farmers, not consulting them and giving many of them no chance.

A recent National Farmers Union survey showed that farming incomes were back to below 1988–89 levels.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise the damage that the previous Conservative Government did to the rural economy? They presided over it for 18 years, during which there was Alar in the apple industry, anthrax in the pig industry, botulism in the food processing industry, listeria in the dairy industry, salmonella in the poultry industry, E. coli in the meat industry and BSE in the beef industry. Does he believe that that strengthened or weakened the rural economy in Wales?

Mr. Evans: If the Government had sat back and done nothing to support the farming industry, with those problems, it would have been a complete disaster. I have already mentioned the enormous £1.4 billion support on BSE. The Government's reactions in the next three or four years will be interesting. There have been incidences of E. coli in Scotland since this Government came to power. We shall not scaremonger in the appalling way that certain Labour spokesmen did when we were in government. Some of the comments made when the BSE crisis began did not help hill farmers in Wales. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will recall the right hon. Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) asking:

"Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that public confidence on this issue is hanging by a thread?"—[*Official Report*, 20 March 1996; Vol. 274, c. 376.]

Matthew Parris succinctly remarked the following day in his column that she then proceeded to cut it. I know that the hon. Gentleman was not in Parliament then, but some of the statements made by other Labour Members at that time were not helpful to hill farmers in Wales or any other farmers throughout the country.

A recent National Farmers Union survey showed that farming incomes were back to below 1988–89 levels. It also showed that 74 per cent. thought that the main reason for young people not taking up hill farming was the low incomes. The president of the Country Landowners Association has predicted that hill farmers face tough times unless the Government boost special payments to keep their incomes above the breadline. He said:

"HLCAs were originally brought in to compensate farmers for the natural handicaps to farming in LFAs. Now more than ever, this policy is justified and higher rates are needed for LFA farmers to survive."

By cutting the HLCA, the Government are acting ahead of the outcome of the annual review of the state of hill farming. It is like a judge passing a life sentence for murder before he has heard any of the defence's evidence. It is an irresponsible act worthy only of a Government who have shown themselves untrustworthy and unable to keep their word. They say whatever they feel like at the time. If it turns out to be inconvenient later, they simply drop it. It is a betrayal of our farmers' trust.

The over-30-months scheme provides farmers with compensation for the culling of cattle over 30 months as they come to the end of their working lives. The culling of cattle over 30 months was one of the conditions for the lifting of the beef ban agreed at the European Council of Ministers meeting in Florence in 1996. By the time of the general election, more than 1.2 million cattle had been culled under the scheme.

We have already heard how wonderful the Government are, with their pro-communautaire policies and their relations with our European neighbours. At the time of the BSE crisis, they said that the Conservative Government were not doing enough to lift the ban, but the ban has not been lifted since 1 May. We want the Government to do more. They said that they had good relations with Europe. They almost gave the impression that if they were elected on 1 May, the ban would be lifted on 2 May. That has not happened. It is damaging to the industry in Wales.

In March 1996, before the BSE crisis, the average price reported by the Meat and Livestock Commission for a grade 1 cull cow was 95.3p per kilo liveweight. That made an 800 kg cull cow worth about £760. With the new weight limits and prices, the same animal would be worth only £311, an enormous drop in farmers' incomes. The accusation against Welsh farmers, and against farmers generally, was that the system was being abused. That is an ill-founded, ill-considered accusation against hard-working, decent farmers. I ask that the Government take measures to review the decisions that they have taken, which are hitting farmers in Wales so hard.

On green pound revaluation, the value of sterling has risen strongly since the general election, caused at least in part by the four interest rate rises since 1 May. That has led to a further revaluation of the green pound and means that the value of common agricultural policy support prices in sterling has fallen. The agreement at the June 1995 Agriculture Council allowed member states to freeze the green rate applying to CAP direct payments. We exercised that right to protect British farmers against revaluation. The freeze protects the value in sterling of more than 60 per cent. of CAP expenditure and is worth a massive £440 million over two years. To compensate for the effects of the strong pound, the Government can apply to the Commission for further compensation to help farmers whose CAP payments have effectively been reduced by the strong pound. The Government should take that course of action at the earliest possible time, which would go some way to helping Welsh farmers.

Mr. Llwyd: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No, I said that I would finish at 12.10 and I aim to do that.

I ask the Minister to reverse the weight limits, seek greater compensation and give real assistance to farmers through the hill livestock compensatory allowance, to help farmers in their time of need. They do not need an insensitive Government who look the other way. Welsh farmers deserve better; if they do not get it, the loss of the livelihoods of thousands of Welsh farmers will lie with this Government.

12.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) on his success in the ballot and on taking the opportunity to raise matters of great importance to the rural communities of Wales. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) and for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas) and the hon. Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey), for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) and for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), all of whom made thoughtful contributions.

The hon. Member for Dribble—I mean Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), I was getting him confused with Tom Finney—can say all that he likes now but the huge crisis that we face is the doing of his Government. He knows that all his demands for expenditure were left unprovided for in their Red Book estimates in the last public expenditure round. That is part of the problem with which we have to deal.

As to lifting the ban, when one considers that we were left in a trench as deep as the Marianas in the Pacific, it has to be recognised that we have already made huge progress in increasing the European Union's confidence in the measures that we are taking to ensure that it can be lifted. I assure all the hon. Members who raised the matter that we give it the highest priority. It is the opening of export markets to British produce that will make the fundamental difference.

Mr. Evans: We all agree that lifting the ban would boost Welsh farmers. Can the Minister give us any idea of when he believes that it will be lifted?

Mr. Griffiths: I would love to be able to, but I can say only that we are giving the matter top priority. The sooner it happens, the better, but I cannot set a deadline because that would look as if I were holding our European colleagues to ransom. I assure the House that it is a top Government priority.

[Mr. Griffiths]

While agriculture accounts for only a small part of total employment in the Principality as a whole, in the rural areas of Wales it is the dominant occupation and one on which scores of other jobs depend. The rural economy depends on healthy agriculture. The Government's commitment to agriculture remains very firm. We believe that an efficient and competitive farming industry in Wales is an essential part of our rural economy and vital to the cultural and social life of rural areas.

The number of people engaged in the industry is declining, as it has for decades but, thankfully, in Wales it is a modest decline. It is inevitable that, as farming methods improve and productivity rises, the number of farmers will decrease, but we recognise that those who continue to work in agriculture are entitled to a reasonable measure of support from the community as a whole, not least because of their role in preserving the landscape that is so valued by millions of townspeople. While the number of farmers continues to decline, their impact in rural communities remains as strong as ever.

The Government have a large number of market support measures, such as the sheep annual premium scheme, the beef special premium scheme, arable crops area payments, hill livestock compensatory allowances, the agri-environment programme, the environmentally sensitive area scheme, and Tir Cymen. An integrated countryside and agricultural information service provides free advice to farmers in Wales. We have two grant schemes designed to help companies improve their food processing and marketing facilities. The European Commission has given structural support amounting to £28 million over five years under the European agricultural guidance and guarantee fund. Government support has helped to maintain the incomes of those employed in agriculture in Wales over the years. In talking about the Government in this case, I refer to the previous Government, because all those schemes are on-going and part of the European Community process.

Planned expenditure on agriculture in Wales this year is around £250 million. That is a demonstration of our support for the rural economy and a significant contribution from the taxpayer. I recognise that farming is at the heart of community life in the hills of Wales. Farming in the hills of Wales is predominantly the production of sheep and suckler cows. We fully endorse the importance of HLCAs to Wales, where 80 per cent. of the land is in less-favoured areas.

I underline what was said last night and raised again by my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire. The £60 million to which the previous Government so often referred was a special one-off payment. As the hon. Member for Ceredigion pointed out, it should never have got embroiled with HLCAs. No provision was made for it in this year's budget. That is part of the problem that we are dealing with.

I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales have had good discussions with the Farmers Union of Wales and the National Farmers Union in Wales about the difficulties that their members face. Over the next few weeks, we shall consider what they and others have said to us, but, as hon. Members know, the Government are pledged to live within overall public expenditure targets set by the previous Administration. That was part of the basis on which we were elected, but it makes life difficult for us. Having said that, we are considering the situation in the hill farms and of farming in Wales and we are setting up a dialogue, which I shall mention again, for the future.

We want to ensure that hill farmers and those in less-favoured and severely disadvantaged areas continue to receive a high level of support. It is interesting to note that the rate of decline in farming in severely disadvantaged areas is much slower than that recorded in other parts of Wales. The rate of decline in non-less-favoured areas, for example, is just under 20 per cent., whereas it is 2 per cent. elsewhere.

Last year, most of the £226 million of subsidies for the production of livestock in Wales went to farmers in less-favoured areas. Those significant sums of money demonstrate that we are committed to HLCAs.

Hon. Members will be aware that the Welsh Institute of Rural Studies at Aberystwyth has won the contract for the evaluation of HLCAs in Wales. It will be presenting its report to the Welsh Office before the end of the year. As soon as I have read it, I shall send a copy to hon. Member for Ceredigion and the farming unions and I shall also place a copy in the Library so that all hon. Members can look at it. It will be an important contribution to establishing a dialogue between the farming unions and others about the future of agriculture in Wales and how best to support it.

We also face the challenge posed by the reform of the common agriculture policy. In addition to the internal need for that to happen for the good of the development of the European Union, one must consider external factors such as the need for our goods to be competitive on world markets. The World Trade Organisation wants agricultural markets to be opened up. We also want CAP to become more market oriented, with payments decoupled from production, and supply controls removed.

All those issues will be subject to radical thinking and the Government want to play their full part in helping to construct a modern, sustainable and environmentally friendly agriculture policy. The debate has shown that that desire is shared by plenty of other hon. Members. We know that there will be challenges to farmers in adjusting to any new regime. We shall continue to consult the industry and farming unions in Wales about the proposed EC reforms, and we understand farmers' concerns.

We believe that the reform of the CAP is necessary and inevitable and that Welsh agriculture must respond and adapt to the challenge of reform. Unlike the previous Government, this Government will look at constructive ways in which to provide practical help to farmers to make that possible. We need to examine the needs of key sectors in the Welsh agricultural industry, such as the beef, lamb and dairy industries, which will be affected most directly by CAP reform, while looking at the development potential of our other important farming sector, horticulture.

In that context, it is particularly important to develop the range of premium and added-value food products that our industries produce. We shall continue to support the development of food promotion schemes such as farm assurance schemes, which prove the quality of our products and have done much to help them appeal to the retailer and the consumer alike. That is why the work of the Welsh food strategy is so important to the long-term

competitive position of agriculture in Wales. I am keen to see that work developed more effectively. I want to see Wales develop a good reputation for first-class food products, which will give us a strong market position in organic and farm-assured foods.

Mr. Dafis: I like what the Minister is saying. I, too, would like to emphasise that adding value to Welsh food and the production of high-quality products are important issues of economic development. That must be borne in mind when deciding the spending priorities of the new development agency. Together with inward investment, such issues will be key, important considerations in the creation of a vibrant economy in rural areas and in Wales generally.

Mr. Griffiths: The Secretary of State for Wales, my fellow Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) and I will use our respective briefs to consider that issue. We want to ensure that our economic powerhouse, to which reference has already been made, adds value to the work of the Rural Development Agency, to strengthen the rural economy in Wales.

The BSE crisis has certainly added to the difficulties that hill farmers are facing. As I have already said, one of our high priorities is to get rid of the export ban. We are also aware that some of the changes that we have announced, together with the OTMS and the difficulties in responding quickly on the revaluation of the green pound, have caused further problems for farmers. As my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food made clear last night, we are still considering the green pound revaluation and have got until January to make a decision about most of the products affected. We want to get to grips with those problems.

In the short-term, it is important to appreciate that we inherited a dire situation. It is therefore difficult to fulfil the Opposition's expectation that we will undo the severe damage inflicted in the past eight years in just a couple of months.

We want to beef up the agri-environment scheme. The hon. Members for Ynys Môn and for Brecon and Radnorshire asked about providing money for whole-farm management to make such a proposal worth while. We have not made any decision about the rates of payment, but we realise that we must make them attractive so that farmers will opt into the scheme. The resources required from 1999 will be considered as part of the comprehensive spending review. We want that scheme to be successful.

It is inevitable that the schemes that provide most added value environmentally will get the money first, but we shall not make Tir Cymen or something like it an all-Wales scheme, in receipt of a fixed amount. That would not be in keeping with the spirit of our proposals. The exact amount of additional resources available will, however, depend on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. The working group is considering the scheme now. We want to ensure that everything that we do is designed to meet our targets on biodiversity and other commitments.

It is important to us that farming continues in rural Wales because of the associated social, cultural, economic and conservation considerations. I can reassure the House that the Government are committed to re-establishing a prosperous agricultural industry in Wales. When we discussed HLCAs with the farming unions they accepted the existence of a short-term difficulty. We had a positive dialogue about moving the debate beyond the first two years in question to ensure that there is a common approach to the development of long-term strategies.

Mr. Evans: How many farms in less-favoured areas does the Minister think will be able to survive two years? In the last minute, what good news can he give to farmers farming in less-favoured areas?

Mr. Griffiths: The hon. Gentleman will know that we face the problem of working within the budget that the Conservative Government considered to be sufficient to deal with those issues. All I can say is that we are looking for ways to provide some short-term help, but there is no question of my being able to trumpet any major figures now, because difficult discussions are still going on. We accept that there is a need to do something in the short term, but it is difficult. I would not wish to raise anyone's hopes, but the point—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

River Thames (Transport Safety)

12.30 pm

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise a matter that will be of concern to the House and especially to those hon. Members whose constituencies, like mine, border the Thames.

Hon. Members will remember that, last week, a 3,000 lb dredger known as the Sand Kite collided with the Thames barrier and sank. Thankfully, none of the 10 crew on the vessel was seriously hurt and there were no other casualties; nor, it appears, was the barrier seriously damaged, although it was closed as a result of the accident, which was the most serious to have occurred since the barrier became operational 15 years ago. However, the potential impact of the incident was far worse, as the shipping journal *Lloyd's List* pointed out in its leading article the following day:

"In this case no lives were lost, and the Thames Barrier has demonstrated that it is a good deal stronger than the forepart of a ship. The accident did not coincide with the 100 year North Sea storm surge and a spring tide working against flooding in the Thames Valley. London has survived again. It could have been a good deal worse."

It could indeed.

The vessel involved, although now named the Sand Kite, was previously called the Bow Knight and it is the sister ship of the Bow Belle, which was involved in the tragic 1989 collision with the Marchioness that killed 51 people. In the early 1980s, a third sister ship, the Bow Trader, was involved in a collision with a small passenger craft; and, in 1992, that same ship scored a double hit when it ran into two Thames bridges: the Cannon Street railway bridge and Southwark road bridge. I can understand why the owners wished to drop the Sand Kite's maiden name.

Such incidents provide a vivid warning of the respect with which we should treat the stretch of water that flows only a few feet from where we are debating today. It is powerful and can be both capricious and dangerous. Hon. Members do not need reminding of the incident involving the Sand Kite—it is still fresh in our memories—and we cannot be certain of the causes of the incident until the marine accidents investigation branch has completed its investigation. My reason for bringing the matter to the House's attention today is that it is a timely warning that proposals being promoted by the Port of London Authority could have serious implications for safety and environmental hazard.

I refer to pilotage direction No. 5, which proposes to exempt vessels of less than 80 m in length from the requirement to take on a pilot in the river; currently, only vessels of less than 50 m are exempt. In the Thames estuary, vessels of less than 90 m will be exempt from having to take on a pilot; the current limit is 80 m. It is a little puzzling that the PLA should be proposing a reduction in pilotage at this time. Recent incidents should surely have alerted us to the potential dangers of unpiloted vessels. The Bow Trader was exempt from having a pilot on board when it collided with the Southwark and Cannon Street bridges. The Bow Belle did not have a pilot on board when it sank the Marchioness. The Bow Knight, alias the Sand Kite, did not have a pilot on board when it wedged itself against the Thames barrier and sank last week.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): May I add to that list the Thames bubbler, a larger vessel owned by Thames Water and used to aerate the Thames, which collided with Putney rail bridge? There was no underground service from the south-west of London into central London for some days. The incident occurred in 1991, but it is only in the past few months that the service has been restored, at a cost of several million pounds. Will the Minister, separate from the debate, advise me whether the PLA has changed its way of working, taking into account the incidents involving the bubbler and the Sand Kite?

Mr. Pond: I have no way of knowing whether the vessel that my hon. Friend mentioned had a pilot on board when that incident occurred. Nor do we have any way of knowing whether the other incidents I mentioned would have occurred had the vessels had pilots on board. We can be certain of one thing, however: the likelihood of such an incident would not have been greater with a pilot than without.

I understand that, following the Marchioness tragedy, the marine accidents investigation branch recommended an increase in pilotage standards on the Thames, yet the PLA is proposing to do the opposite. Following the report on the grounding of the Sea Empress at Milford Haven, with disastrous environmental consequences, the Government have ordered a review of the Pilotage Act 1987, yet the PLA is apparently proposing to go it alone and reduce pilotage on the Thames before the outcome of that review is heard.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Is my hon. Friend aware that although the PLA has requested changes to regulations on pilotage, Members of Parliament whose constituencies bank on the Thames have not been made part of the process?

Mr. Pond: I share that concern. I have had a meeting with the PLA at its headquarters in Gravesend in my constituency, but I am concerned about the extent of the consultation process. I am especially concerned about the importance that the PLA has placed on the views of its pilots and of users of the Thames. Although the PLA has had meetings with pilots, there is no evidence that real consultation has taken place, and that should be of concern to the House.

I was first made aware of the proposals, which will come into effect on 15 January 1998 unless the PLA reconsiders its position, by representatives of the London river pilots and by the Medway pilots, who are major users of the Thames. I raised the matter in oral questions in July and in an early-day motion, also tabled in July and signed by 19 Members of Parliament. The pilots, whom the PLA acknowledges are "the experts", are unanimously opposed to the proposals. In a letter to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Medway pilots committee warned that the proposals

"would affect the safety and environment of the Thames Estuary and River".

The PLA denies that risk to safety is involved or that there is an increased risk of environmental hazard. Despite repeated warnings from its own pilots and those on the Medway, the PLA apparently intends to press ahead, if allowed to do so, with its plans for increased pilotage exemptions. We need, therefore, to examine the arguments carefully.

The first of the PLA's arguments is that the vessels to be exempted under the proposals are relatively small. It is, nevertheless, a fact that ships the size of Westminster

Hall will be able to navigate the Thames without taking on board a pilot. I would not consider them particularly small. Moreover, as the chairman of the London pilots committee reminded the PLA in a letter dated 30 September 1997:

"Pilots do not consider 'modest changes' to be a realistic description of the proposals for changing the limits above Sea Reach No. 1"—

that is, in the river itself. The letter goes on:

"It should be considered that raising the limit by 60 per cent. from 50 to 80 metres results in the deadweight of ships affected increasing . . . from approximately 700 tonnes to 2,500 tonnes, perhaps more".

It points out that manoeuvrability is generally in inverse proportion to size.

Even if the PLA were correct in its assertion that the vessels affected are relatively small, such vessels can still create hazards for other river users should they find themselves in trouble or acting erratically. What would the House say of a proposal to exempt light aircraft and helicopters from air traffic control? Would we not be slightly concerned that such aircraft might collide with jumbo jets that were subject to directions from the control tower?

An experienced pilot recently wrote to me to explain the risks:

"The non-piloted ships being unaware of the constraints of the larger vessels could either hog the deep water, force the tanker to take evasive action, resulting in grounding or a collision, or just generally impede the safe passage . . . Having spoken to many large ship masters recently about this review, they express alarm and concern with regards to the considerably increased risks."

An additional implication of exempting so-called smaller vessels derives from the fact that it is on these vessels that newly qualified pilots gain their experience—that is part of the training process for pilots on the Thames. With such vessels exempted, pilots will have to practise on the larger vessels.

The second argument of the PLA—it is a legitimate one—is that the proposals introduce new requirements for vessels above a certain draught to take on a pilot even if they are below the proposed length requirement. The PLA argues that draught is more important than length in determining safety.

I have no objection to the PLA's introducing new draught requirements for pilotage; I am sure that other hon. Members will have no objections either—the pilots certainly have none. The difficulty, however, lies in the suggestion that that should go hand in hand with a reduction in the length requirement. While the PLA is correct to maintain that it is the draught of a vessel, not its length, which determines its likelihood of running aground, the authority also acknowledges that length determines manoeuvrability and, hence, the danger of collision.

The reason for today's debate, after all, is that the House is concerned about a number of collisions on the Thames, including those involving the Bow Belle and the Marchioness. What is more, as one experienced river pilot explained to me last night, draught is no indicator of safety and it is very difficult to police.

I do not want to get myself into deep water dealing with the technicalities, if colleagues will forgive the pun, or stray too far beyond my technical expertise, which is not extensive. However, I understand that it is difficult to police the draught of a vessel because much of it is under water at any given time. Nor is draught a fixed measure. The master of a ship can adjust draught as necessary by shifting cargo, fuel or water in the tanks, and he may be encouraged to do so if it avoids the bothersome business of having to take on a pilot.

Thirdly, the PLA points out that vessels carrying marine pollutants in bulk should be compelled to take on a pilot, regardless of size. The PLA argues that that is a further reason why we should not be concerned about the environmental implications of the proposals. I find that puzzling. The PLA tells us that vessels of less than 80 m do not run a significant risk of collision or grounding. Why, then, should we or the PLA be concerned about whether they are carrying marine pollutants? Is this a sign that the PLA is not wholly confident about the implications of exempting certain vessels?

We must also ask: what are marine pollutants in bulk? Would we consider 15,000 litres of fuel oil an environmental hazard if discharged into the Thames? The PLA certainly did last week, when it made the effort to pump that amount of fuel oil off the Sand Kite as an environmental precaution. It was not being carried as cargo; it was being carried as fuel. The Sand Kite is only marginally bigger, at 98 m, than the vessels that the PLA proposes to exempt from pilotage.

All vessels require fuel oil, sometimes very large amounts of it, just to propel them along the river. Unlike large tankers, smaller vessels are likely to have fuel tanks that are single skinned, posing the risk that the fuel will be discharged in the event of an accident.

The full effects of the PLA proposals are difficult to assess. The PLA cannot tell us with any precision how many additional vessel movements will be exempted under the proposals. It suggests that 1,000 additional movements will take place without a pilot each year—although I have this morning seen PLA figures that suggest the number might be as great as 1,800. Even on those figures, that is a great many more opportunities for incidents such as the Sand Kite crash to occur. The pilots suggest that there could be as many as 4,000 additional exempted movements.

The PLA cannot satisfactorily explain why the changes are necessary. The savings, we are told, will be minimal, and there are no plans to cut pilot numbers still further—they have already been significantly reduced in recent years. While the advantages of the proposals are difficult to discern, however, the disadvantages have been all too vividly illustrated by recent incidents on the Thames.

The port of London is one of the busiest in the world and it is becoming busier all the time. Ships entering the Thames often carry foreign crews with little knowledge of the port of London—or often of English. Pressures on costs have resulted in the so-called lean manning of vessels, so that

"it is not uncommon to find excessive fatigue in evidence amongst ships crews".

All this should point to the need for more stringent pilotage on the Thames. Already, the requirements here are more lax than in any other European member state. Foreign crews who can enter the port of London without

[Mr. Pond]

a pilot will nevertheless be required to take on a pilot when navigating their home ports on their return. The chief harbour master, Rear Admiral Bruce Richardson, tells me that

"the safety performance of the Port of London has been and continues to be excellent."

On PLA figures, there have been only 15 recorded incidents in the past year. We must be slightly sceptical about those figures. Evidence provided by the pilots suggests that the number could be much higher—they recorded 90 incidents between the beginning of June and the beginning of August alone. Of course, those incidents were of varying seriousness, but we know that all of them could have been dangerous. Just one such incident, involving the Sand Kite, should be enough to warn of the dangers.

I understand that the Secretary of State is technically unable to prevent the PLA from pressing ahead with these proposals, but I am grateful to the Library for eliciting the response from a PLA official that

"although the authority has the power in law to implement any changes in its directions, it would be very unlikely to go ahead if the Secretary of State strongly opposed them".

I hope that the Minister will clarify the position for us. I believe that the proposals should be strongly opposed. Last week's incident should at least cause the PLA to draw breath and think again. The investigation into it could provide important lessons for the PLA and for river users. The authority may argue that the new technology in which it plans to invest will provide additional safety for vessel movements, but the technology is not yet operational and is unlikely to become so for a year or 18 months. Moreover, the PLA should be requested, if that is all that the Secretary of State can do, to withhold implementation of its proposals until the results of the review of the Pilotage Act are complete.

Finally, I hope that the Minister who is good enough to respond today will feel able to use her good offices to persuade the PLA to defer its plans, listen carefully to its experienced pilots, and perhaps take the time to draw lessons from the Sand Kite incident.

12.49 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr. Pond) on obtaining this timely debate and thank him for his generosity in allowing interventions by my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Mr. Colman) and for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt). I shall write to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney on the issue that he raised. If, by any chance, I do not manage to touch on all the points that my hon. Friends have made, I shall forward complete copies of my speech.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham said, the Sand Kite, a dredger of 98 m length, collided with the Thames flood barrier at 6.50 am on Monday 27 October. Fortunately, there were neither casualties nor pollution. The Sand Kite was inbound, laden with sand and gravel. Visibility was reduced by fog to 400 yd. A similar-sized dredger had preceded the Sand Kite a few minutes earlier without incident, but the Sand Kite struck the barrier, started to sink and was then grounded.

The marine accidents investigation branch is conducting an inspector's inquiry and the House will agree that it would be wrong to speculate on the cause of the incident until we have that report.

My hon. Friend said that the Sand Kite was previously known as the Bow Kite and averred that she was a sister vessel to the Bow Belle. I understand, however, that the Sand Kite is a very different design, a much larger vessel, and of a different class. The Sand Kite struck the Thames barrier at an angle and no serious damage has yet been found. There is little likelihood of needing to raise the barrier to protect London from flooding between now and 12 November, as tides will be low.

In the light of points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham, may I deal with pilotage and its importance in relation to the general issue of safety on the river? The Sand Kite was subject to a compulsory pilotage direction, issued by the competent harbour authority, the Port of London Authority. The master is a frequent user of the Thames and holder of a pilotage exemption certificate, as is his first mate, who was logged as being the pilot for the passage at the time of the collision.

The current statutory basis for compulsory pilotage is the Pilotage Act 1987. Before the Act, pilotage services were organised by pilotage authorities working out of pilotage districts. The 1987 Act swept those authorities away, and responsibility for the provision of pilotage services was transferred to "competent harbour authorities". The PLA is an example of one such authority. A CHA is any harbour authority with statutory powers over the regulation of shipping movements and the safety of navigation within its harbour, and whose harbour falls wholly or partly within an active former pilotage district.

Under the Act, a CHA may, if it is in the interests of safety, direct pilotage to be compulsory for ships navigating in any area or part of an area in which it has the duty to provide pilotage. Such a direction may apply to all ships, or all ships of a specified description, but may not apply to ships of less than 20 m in length or to fishing boats with a registered length of less than 47.5 m.

The 1987 Act also imposes on CHAs, such as the PLA, certain duties in the provision of pilotage services. It requires each CHA to keep under consideration whether any and, if so, what pilotage services need to be provided to secure the safety of ships; whether pilotage should be compulsory and, if so, for which ships and in which circumstances; and what pilotage services need to be provided. The CHA must establish and keep under review a framework of pilotage operations for its area.

Under the Act, the CHA that has given a pilotage direction must, on application by any bona fide master or first mate of any ship, grant a pilotage exemption certificate—a PEC—if it is satisfied that the applicant's skill, experience and local knowledge are sufficient for the applicant to be capable of piloting the ship of which he or she is master or first mate, and any other ships specified in the certificate, within its harbour or such part of its harbour as may be so specified. The conditions imposed on an applicant must not be unduly onerous, having regard to the difficulties and danger of navigation in the harbour in question. They must not be more onerous than those required to be met by a person applying to the authority to be an authorised pilot in its area.

The current law allows compulsory pilotage to be imposed by a CHA only in connection with the safety of vessels in its area. The CHA is obliged to grant PECs to suitably qualified masters or mates, and that exemption may be withheld only where unusual hazards are involved in shipping movements within a harbour.

The 1987 Act reserves almost no role on pilotage for my Department. The Department has no oversight of harbour pilotage and no general information about how competent harbour authorities carry out their functions. As the House will no doubt recall, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has therefore announced a review of the arrangements for harbour pilotage under the Pilotage Act 1987. The review covers the whole of the UK. It is well under way and has involved discussions with the Marine Safety Agency, the three port associations, the UK Harbour Masters' Association, the Chamber of Shipping, the Nautical Institute, the National Union of Marine, Aviation and Shipping Transport Officers, the Transport and General Workers Union and the UK Pilots Association. Visits have also been made to individual ports where local pilots have been consulted. The PLA has offered officials working on the review an opportunity to visit the port on 8 December to talk to the authority's officers, pilots and users.

I am aware of pilots' concerns about proposals put forward by the PLA to alter their pilotage direction. The PLA has been responsible for pilotage on the Thames since the 1987 Act came into force. It has not hitherto undertaken any substantial change to the pilotage directions that it inherited and it has a statutory duty under the Act to review its pilotage requirements. That is the review currently under way, the object of which has been to enhance safety. It has been based on an assessment of risks and seeks to introduce the draught, or depth of a vessel, in addition to the length, as a criterion for pilotage. The PLA believes that the risks of grounding in its area are determined more by draught than by any other vessel characteristic.

The review proposes to replace the single criterion for compulsory pilotage with a combination of length and draught. In that way, the PLA can target pilotage more precisely where risk demands. Certain shallow draught vessels that do not pose a significant risk, which in the past have been compelled to take a pilot on grounds of length alone, would no longer be compelled to do so. Pilotage for vessels carrying hazardous cargoes and passenger vessels will remain compulsory. An added safety feature is the proposal to make the new limits responsive to poor visibility by reducing yet further the allowable draught limitation when visibility is significantly reduced.

I hope that it will be seen that none of the proposed changes to the PLA pilotage regime are relevant to the Sand Kite incident. The Sand Kite and vessels similar to it will remain subject to compulsory pilotage, as will all vessels over 50 m length navigating above Barking creek in the vicinity of the Thames barrier. A system of exemptions from the requirement to have a pilot on board will always be needed. Masters and mates familiar with the harbour should be able to apply for exemption certificates, as now, and be granted them on proof of competence.

At present, ships over 50 m in length navigating the river, and those over 80 m in length navigating the estuary, must be piloted. All PLA PEC holders are required, as a minimum, to make six entries or departures during the previous 12 months, under the guidance of an authorised pilot. For vessels over 100 m, applicants are also required to sit a series of oral examinations. All certificates are subject to annual renewal.

The review of the Act that my Department is undertaking is necessarily at a more general policy level. It is not intended to include case-by-case examination of each CHA's directions. Pilots have asked, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham argued, that the PLA's proposals should not be implemented until my Department's more general review has been completed. That is a matter for the PLA. We have no power to insist on it.

I understand that the London pilots are particularly concerned about consultation. The Port of London Authority tells me that it has consulted its own staff, including pilots, and river users and riparian authorities. The consultation process is nearing completion, and I understand that the PLA met its pilots for the fourth time on this subject on 28 October.

Before I conclude--

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

A5 Trunk Road

1 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing the deplorable state of the road north of Shrewsbury to be brought to the attention of Parliament.

I believe that the matter was last debated in 1817, when Irish Members, exasperated by the road stretching from London to Holyhead, which goes back to Roman times, managed to persuade Parliament to commission Thomas Telford to rebuild the road. He found that the condition of the road between London and Shrewsbury was not too bad, but the road from Shrewsbury to Holyhead had to be completely rebuilt. It was described after that time as the finest road in Europe.

There are echoes of that today. A person leaving Dover can drive 200 miles on motorways or dual carriageway. Coming to Shrewsbury, that person will drive on a new dual carriageway built in 1992. There are roundabouts at Shrewsbury, and the road later becomes single carriageway. That person's life is at risk. He passes through Nesscliffe, the first village to be traversed since leaving Dover.

Reaching my constituency, the driver comes to Shottaton, a crossroad that has not changed since Thomas Telford built it. It the most dangerous crossroad in Shropshire. Two miles further on, at Queen's Head, there is the second most dangerous junction. At Oswestry, there are four roundabouts. For the purposes of this debate, I am including the road from the Shropshire boundary on to Ruabon, which is designated the A483. That is also single carriageway. From Ruabon onwards, it is plain sailing—dual carriageway right the way through to Holyhead.

It is extraordinary that we expect long-distance goods traffic and express buses to travel at high speed all the way from Dover, and then suddenly to cope with the demands of a narrow road built in the early 19th century, competing with local traffic, local buses, local delivery vehicles and local people going to school and trying to cross—there are 94 access points to the A5, 23 junctions and 23 footpaths. The result is confusion.

Traffic is increasing. At Moreton Hall, 21,300 vehicles cross on an average day. That is an increase of 44 per cent. from 1991 to 1996. Already this year, there has been an increase of 5.9 per cent. in traffic. There is dreadful confusion, congestion and, above all, an entirely unacceptable level of accidents.

I could read out the most harrowing letters, outlining the human misery caused by those accidents, which are totally unnecessary. I shall give the figures, which speak with a horrible, cold clarity. From 1992 to September this year, between Shrewsbury and Ruabon, there have been 276 accidents; 367 people have been slightly injured; 147 have been seriously injured; and 25 people have been killed.

The West Mercia police have a formula for calculating the cost to the community of accidents. They estimate that slight injury costs us all £10,000, a serious injury £150,000, and a death £1 million. I estimate that the road has cost the country more than £50 million in the past five years.

The only solution is to build a dual carriageway from Shrewsbury to Ruabon. The new dual carriageway round Shrewsbury has reduced the accident rate to levels below the national level. If those levels prevailed on the A5, next year there would be 45 fewer accidents, and two fewer people would die.

The road would not be cheap. Shropshire county council's engineers estimate £48 million for the stretch from Shrewsbury to Oswestry, and another £34 million from Oswestry to Ruabon. However, the payback in simple human terms—the reduction in human suffering and loss of life—would be rapid.

There is also a local economic cost. Oswestry has the highest unemployment in Shropshire at 7 per cent., and the Victoria ward of Oswestry has male unemployment of 13 per cent. However, the Highways Agency has the statutory duty to overrule local planners if any new project would bring extra traffic to the A5 above 3 per cent.

That has already happened. A supermarket project was cancelled at Mile End, and now there is a complete blight on any further development on that site. It is extraordinary, considering the fact that storage, refrigeration and food distribution is a major industry in Oswestry. To deliver just on time to supermarkets all over the country, those distributors need a road that they can rely on. The existing road is not reliable.

Just up the road, at Gobowen, there is the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt orthopaedic hospital, offering care second to none in the world, serving 8 million people and employing 900. The future of that hospital must be prejudiced if health authorities are loth to risk their patients on the road, which is dangerous and subject to delays. The workings of that major hospital are constantly disrupted by the delays caused by the accidents on the A5, as patients and consultants do not arrive on time.

There is a regional aspect. The Shropshire Gap links the west midlands industrial conurbations and also Wrexham and the industrial area of north-east Wales. Soon, those areas will also be damaged by the constant delays of freight and passenger traffic being held up on the A5. That is bizarre, when one considers that the road has been designated one of the key roads in the trans-European road network—that is the road from Felixstowe, Britain's largest container port, through to Holyhead. Of the 333 miles, 32 miles are single carriageway, and those are the miles between Shrewsbury and Ruabon, which are as narrow as 7.3 m in parts of my constituency.

It would be entirely consistent with the strategy laid out in the Government's discussion paper to invest in a dual carriageway on the A5. The Government would not be reacting in an ad hoc manner to a spirited local campaign, as the investment would be the final link—the final 10 per cent.—in a strategic road, which would conform to the Government's idea of long-term investment in planned integrated trunk roads.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): As the House may know, my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) was born and bred in the county of Shropshire and knows the county and its problems well. Is it his impression that over the past few years, since the completion of the Shrewsbury bypass, and the making of the road north of Wrexham into a dual carriageway, the weight of traffic on that section of the A5 through Shropshire has increased exponentially? Does he recognise that some of the so-called improvements that have been carried out on that road have created accident

blackspots, which the Government would do well to study, with a view to making the road more capable of carrying the volumes of traffic that currently go along it, and making it safer?

Mr. Paterson: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention: I concur entirely with his views. As I said, traffic at Moreton Hall increased by 44 per cent. from 1991 to 1996 and has grown by 5.9 per cent. this year. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct when he says that some minor improvements have made the situation worse. Queen's Head junction was built in 1986 and is a relatively new road, but it is the second most dangerous junction after Thomas Telford's road at Shottaton.

There would certainly be environmental gains if the road were improved. The village of Nesscliffe, just outside my constituency, is totally blighted by heavy traffic passing through it. Because of the interminable delays and accidents on the A5, heavy traffic tries to find a way around it through the narrow byroads and the little villages of north Shropshire. Those villages and roads are totally unsuited to the heavy traffic that tries to force its way through. Road improvements would produce air quality gains: it is well known that heavy engines running at a constant speed produce less pollutants than engines that stop and start.

There would also be a political gain—I am trying to be helpful to the Government. I am sure that the Minister is well aware of the poor communications between north and south Wales. Plugging the Shropshire Gap with a dual carriageway would sharply reduce the travel time between north Wales and Cardiff.

I stress to the Minister the extraordinary support that the campaign has aroused since a summit was held in Oswestry on 4 July. I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Wrexham (Dr. Marek) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) in the Chamber. I assure the Minister that the project enjoys the full support of the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden). I also thank the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) for attending the debate. I have the full support of Shropshire county council, the four district councils and 13 parish councils. The project has the full support of the West Mercia police, the Shropshire fire brigade, the Shropshire ambulance service, the national health service trust at Gobowen, the Confederation of British Industry, the National Farmers Union, the chambers of commerce in Shrewsbury and Oswestry, and the overwhelming support of the business and the farming communities in the area.

Judging from the letters that I have received, I also have the overwhelming support of the people of northern Shropshire. The project also enjoys the support of Shropshire's leading newspaper, the *Shropshire Star*, which sells more copies in Shropshire than all the national dailies combined. In a short time, it has gathered 13,000 to 14,000 signatures in support of the project. That is a significant number.

I would like an assurance from the Minister that she will discuss the matter with her colleagues in the Welsh Office as the stretch of road north of the Shropshire border does not fall in her bailiwick but is an integral part of the project. I also seek an assurance that the Minister and her ministerial colleague from another place, Baroness Hayman, will come to see the road for themselves. As the project has never been a priority in any previous Government's strategy, I would like an assurance from the Minister that that fact will not prejudice it when the Government discuss the very difficult priorities that they must set for the road building programme.

To give a flavour of the strength of feeling in Shropshire about this issue, I cannot improve upon the words of my constituent Mr. Simon Boyes, a teacher from Ruyton-XI-Towns. On 8 October, he wrote:

"Recently my son was involved in a major accident on this road and is lucky to have escaped with his life. I know that you are leading a cross party campaign for the A5 to be upgraded to a dual carriageway. This, in my opinion, cannot be done any too soon. Be assured you have the fullest possible backing from your constituents of whatever political persuasion for anything that can be done to improve the situation. This is a matter of pressing importance and needs instant action on the Ministry of Transport's part."

1.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) on obtaining the debate and on delivering such an informed and passionate speech on behalf of his constituents without the benefit of a single note. I also congratulate him on his generosity in taking an intervention from the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) and in referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden). Both the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend have devoted a great deal of time and effort to drawing the attention of my noble Friend the Minister for Roads to the problems on the A5 between Shrewsbury and the Welsh border. The hon. Member for North Shropshire has detailed those difficulties to the House today.

The hon. Gentleman referred to discussions with the Welsh Office about the project. As he knows, funding for that part of the A5 which runs through Wales is a matter for the Welsh Office, and it will be considered with all other requests for funding. The consideration of road schemes is part of the Welsh Office roads review, which runs in parallel with our roads review for England and Scotland.

Mr. Gill: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way. On that point, does she recognise that there is great resentment in Shropshire where we have very inadequate roads? When we cross the border, we generally find that Welsh roads are in much better condition than those in Shropshire. Much more money has apparently been spent on roads in Wales even though the density of traffic and road usage is comparably less than in Shropshire. That causes an enormous amount of resentment, quite apart from the practical problems so ably outlined by my hon. Friend.

Ms Jackson: I shall certainly consider the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has expressed. I knew that part of the road on the Welsh side of the border well as a child, and resentment was clearly felt then on the Welsh side about what was perceived to be unfair expenditure in Wales.

Before I touch on the specific issues regarding the A5, it might be helpful if I explain how the roads review fits into the overall thrust of the Government's transport policies. We are working to develop an integrated transport policy, which provides the immediate context

[Ms Jackson]

for the roads review. The backdrop to this fundamental review of transport policy is a candid recognition of the fact that we cannot carry on as at present. The predicted growth of traffic and the consequent congestion are unsustainable, and the environmental, economic and social implications are totally unacceptable.

However, the appropriate response cannot be simply to hack away once again at the roads programme without taking any other action. We need to take a much broader view, looking at all modes and using broadly based criteria to assess schemes. One of the encouraging aspects of what is a hugely ambitious task is the degree to which there is agreement that we do need to change.

We need to look at the role of the motor vehicle in providing mobility in a more integrated transport system: one which makes the best use of the contribution that each mode can make; which ensures that all options are considered on a basis that is fair and is seen to be fair; and which takes safety—an essential part of the hon. Gentleman's contribution—environmental, economic, accessibility and integration considerations into account from the outset. It should do that in a way which ensures that we can have confidence in the system and which, above all, is sustainable. That is the context for the roads review. It is an integral part of our integrated transport policy. It is about the role that trunk roads should play alongside other modes in an integrated and sustainable transport policy.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): On the road safety point, does my hon. Friend accept that priority should be afforded to people who live alongside major trunk roads, such as the A5? My constituents in the Wrekin, through which the A5 passes, must cross that road occasionally—although they may not use it—at extremely dangerous junctions. I also press the point about the pressure on local roads that is caused when through traffic seeks to circumvent traffic jams and pinch points by rat running through country lanes. I hope that those specific pressures in my constituency and in those of other hon. Members will be considered in the integrated review that my hon. Friend has outlined.

Ms Jackson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, which highlights difficulties, real dangers and concerns that are not limited to his constituents or his constituency. They can be replicated across the whole country, which is why the issues on which my hon. Friend has touched will be central to our White Paper.

The issue that looms largest in the roads review is undoubtedly congestion. On current predictions, if we do nothing, in 20 years' time there will be roughly half as much traffic again on our roads. We could allow increasing congestion to ration road space, but the costs to industry, the environment and society more generally would, I believe, be unacceptable. That leaves us with three broad options—making better use of the existing infrastructure, managing demand and providing new infrastructure.

Making better use of the existing infrastructure is the obvious first choice. It may also be the least painful. Making better use of the network may help to provide a much-needed breathing space, but there must be some doubt about whether it can cater for more than a small fraction of the forecast increase in demand. That means that we have to look very seriously at the other, harder options—managing demand and providing new infrastructure.

Managing demand is a vast topic, cutting across all modes. It encompasses reducing the need to travel, through land use planning and by changing the way in which we live, work and enjoy our leisure. It must include an assessment of the extent to which we can encourage a shift to other modes. Inevitably, it involves controlling demand by pricing or rationing mechanisms—unpopular though they may be.

At bottom, managing demand is about changing human behaviour. It follows that it is an extremely difficult thing to do. I am sure that we could readily achieve a consensus that as a society we should use cars less, but making it happen is another matter. Managing demand has to be a question of carrots and sticks. The carrots include ensuring that there are attractive public transport alternatives and that there are safe and unpolluted routes for those who would prefer to cycle or walk.

Mr. Gill: During her deliberations on these very difficult questions, will the Minister bear in mind the fact that Shrewsbury was effectively cut off from the capital of the country with the withdrawal of the inter-city service from Shrewsbury to Euston some years ago? One of the greatest boons to the encouragement of public transport in our county would be the restoration of the inter-city route from Euston to Shrewsbury. Many Salopians travel to Crewe, Birmingham International and other stations to catch their trains to London. That, I believe, would not happen if there were an adequate inter-city service from the county town.

Ms Jackson: It would be churlish for me to remind the hon. Gentleman why our integrated railways became less than integrated. It may have had something to do with his Government's policy of rail privatisation, but we, as the new Government, have to deal with the situation with which we have been left. He will be aware that we are concerned to ensure that the £1.8 billion of taxpayers' money that goes into our railways every year produces a high-quality railway service for the people of this country. We are continuing to urge Railtrack to ensure that it really does invest the amounts that it claims it is prepared to invest into our railway system, so that more passengers and freight can be moved on our rail network.

Mr. Paterson: I had a meeting last week with Railtrack and Virgin Rail and am pleased to say that they are planning to bring forward by a year, to next summer, the planned date for restoring daily services from Shrewsbury to London. However, in Shropshire we want both. We want better rail services, but we also want, indeed need—this is the point of my speech—a better road, because certain traffic will not go by rail.

Ms Jackson: I am delighted to hear that Railtrack and Virgin Rail are producing the desired results for Shrewsbury. The hon. Gentleman referred to the needs of the people of Shrewsbury. Those needs could be replicated anywhere in the country. The Government are concerned to create a properly integrated transport strategy in which the carriage of passengers and freight can genuinely be shared.

Easy access to public transport and good interchanges between different public transport services are critical. However—to refer to my carrot and stick analogy—carrots may get us only so far. We must also look at the sticks.

Telling people that they cannot do something that they have hitherto done, or are continuing to do, will cost them more is never easy. We must also be careful that we do not cut across our objective of creating a just and inclusive society and so make mobility the province of the rich.

That brings us to the third and last option: providing new infrastructure. This is also a very difficult option, both financially and in terms of its potential impact on the environment. Circumstances vary from case-to-case. In some cases a new or widened road may be the only option. In others, it may be the best—or least worst—option. There is no substitute here for rigorous case-by-case examination of the options.

We are looking region by region at the perceived traffic problems and the roads programme we inherited from our predecessors. We regard the existence of a scheme in the inherited programme as prima facie evidence of a transport problem. Apart from the roads already under construction and those on which we took decisions in the accelerated review last July, the Government are not committed to any of those schemes at this stage.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Will the Minister assure the House that the strategic implications for economic development, in this case for north, mid and west Wales, will be included in such a review when assessing, for example, the A5 trunk road?

Ms Jackson: As I have already pointed out, the whole purpose behind our consultation process and the publication of a White Paper next year is that there should be a strategy to create an integrated transport system not only for the short and medium term but well into the future. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the point that I made earlier: in Wales a similar review is taking place, based on exactly the same principle. We have to have a strategic overview.

Once we have identified the priority problems, the next step is to ensure that all the credible options are properly evaluated. There is no presumption that a road scheme is the right solution, or that a scheme in the roads programme is the best option. We envisage two outputs from this part of the review: first, a short-term investment programme; secondly, a programme of studies to look at the remaining problems—from which we will develop the medium and longer-term investment programme.

The short-term programme will include measures to make better use of the existing network, and new construction schemes. The new construction schemes are likely to come from the inherited roads programme and address priority problems in a way that is consistent with our integrated transport strategy. We will not put schemes into the programme if it is clear that an alternative option could obviate the need for the existing scheme. The right thing to do in those cases is to study the alternatives more fully before reaching decisions.

I now deal with the specifics of the hon. Gentleman's point about the A5 between the west midlands and north Wales. As he said, the A5 is an important transport link in regional, national and international terms. It is designated as part of the trans-European network route known as the Ireland-UK-Benelux road link. Over the past few years, improvements have been made to the Oswestry bypass, the Chirk bypass and its extension over the Welsh border to Ruabon, and the Shrewsbury to Telford improvement.

Other schemes to improve the Wolfshead Weirbrook section and provide a bypass of Nesscliffe have not gone forward. However, the hon. Gentleman has made it quite clear—both to my noble Friend and in his speech this afternoon—that the A5 has a poor safety record in this area. The Highways Agency is well aware of these problems and is considering various options, including options for an improvement at Shottaton crossroads, for which a 50 mph speed limit and speed cameras, are proposed. The cameras will be installed this year, and speed limits will follow once the statutory processes have been completed. The Highways Agency also proposes to introduce camera sites west of Churncote. It is seeking more information on accident problems on particular sections of the road and is looking at options for traffic-calming measures in Nesscliffe.

The whole of the A5 corridor is being considered as part of the roads review. The Government office for the west midlands is seeking regional views on priorities for investment on trunk roads for the region in the context of an integrated approach to transport planning. Officials from the Government office met local authorities from Shropshire and from Hereford and Worcester on 30 September. At that meeting, the local authorities expressed clear support for dualling of the A5 between Ruabon and Shrewsbury. I know that a route assessment study is being carried out for Shropshire county council, which is partly funded by the Highways Agency. We shall take that work into account when we make decisions on the road programme that will emerge from the review.

I must make it clear that a roads-based solution might not be the best one. As I have already said, we want to look afresh at the role of our road system in an integrated approach to transport planning. We seek long-term solutions that will promote sustainable economic development. The criteria are open and above board—integration, environment, accessibility, safety and economy. We should remember that the A5 forms part of the trans-European road network.

Legal Aid

1.30 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I am grateful to have the opportunity to discuss the Government's legal aid proposals because I regard legal aid as embodying an important principle that we should support and empower. Individuals, especially those who do not have the financial means to employ legal services themselves, sometimes find themselves against big organisations, big corporations and power. Legal aid is an important means of addressing imbalances in our society. The people need the law, and now more than ever in view of the complexity and size of the powerful business organisations that they often have to oppose. They need its support and it should be available to them. If we are to have an equal legal system in which individuals have the ability to take on big power they must be backed in some way by public provision.

I am worried because it seems that the Government's proposals tilt the balance against the people in favour of power in a hasty and ill-considered fashion. If the Government's paramount aim is to provide an efficient service for the less well off, which it should be, the obvious approach would be to take the money that is now provided for legal aid—about £1.5 billion—and use it to establish a competing employed service of solicitors and barristers in the form of a public defender service dealing with criminal cases. It would comprise also a nationwide network of law centres dealing with all the civil matters that are raised in the courts. It is worrying that the Government appear not even to have considered such a service. It seems that they have not considered how we can provide better, more efficient, more direct and more committed support. Instead, the Government are engaged in a Treasury raid on legal aid.

Labour Members criticised the previous Conservative Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay, because his proposals were Treasury driven, yet the Labour Government's proposals seem to be a Treasury nuclear raid on the system which if implemented will effectively destroy it.

I intend to deal primarily with the proposals for compensation cases, which seem to be straightforward and simple and would cut out legal aid completely. I will do so in a spirit which is, of course, helpful to the Government because it will allow them to flesh out their proposals, to tell us what is involved and to demonstrate that the issues have been considered.

Compensation cases are classic instances of the individual against big power—drug companies, industrialists, hospitals or the health service, for example. In many instances, these cases advance the public interest because they prove dereliction of duty and failure on the part of large organisations. In all these instances, the individual is weak when facing the large organisation unless he or she is empowered by some form of public provision.

My hon. Friend the Minister, when he replies, may accuse me of defending vested interests—in other words, lawyers—but instead I am defending the interests of the people, consumers, because they are paramount. I do not care about lawyers squabbling among themselves, with one branch of fat-cat lawyers accusing another branch of being fat-cat lawyers, which is edifying for the rest of us as a spectator sport. The real problem is to decide, against the background of that distasteful argument, how we might best protect the people.

First, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister how much will be saved by removing legal aid from compensation cases. Various estimates range from £600 million to £800. Those figures reflect the cost of civil non-family legal aid. What will be the saving? Are the figures to which I have referred net of recovery? Is recovery to be deducted from the estimated saving? If so, the saving will be comparatively small. There will be a massive shift of power against the people to produce a small saving at the end of the day.

I have no doubt that there are abuses in the legal aid system. The Lord Chancellor has told us, and I agree, that the public should not finance unwinnable cases. I am horrified to be told that the public are supporting such cases. If that is happening, I am sure that the Lord Chancellor has the power to stop the public purse being drained in that way. The issue, however, is to deal with the abuses as they occur rather using abuses as an excuse for scrapping the legal aid system.

We must provide an alternative if we are to cut legal aid. The only alternative is to provide legal aid through a network of law centres.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Mitchell: I would rather not give way because I have a difficult argument to advance and with the need for speed my argument must be somewhat compressed.

Section 202 of the Local Government Act 1972 gives local authorities the power to set up local services. In many instances, that power has not been developed because of lack of finance. If we are to divert massive sums from the legal aid system, surely they should be used to provide community services such as law centres. What a difference a few hundred million pounds would make to law centres throughout the country, but that provision is not being made. Instead, it seems, proposals are to be implemented prematurely without consultation, research and adequate information. That can be said of the proposals that have emerged so far.

The abolition of legal aid for compensation cases and instead placing emphasis on conditional fees did not appear in the Woolf report. That report focused on giving the courts more control over the legal process. Conditional fees put lawyers back in the driving seat because they will have a vested interest in pursuing cases. The Government's proposal was not recommended in the Middleton report either. Sir Peter Middleton did not endorse it. Sir Peter argued in his report that there could be a gradual transition from legal aid to conditional fees, but he did not recommend that legal aid should be scrapped and replaced entirely with conditional fees.

I have no great argument with conditional fees. I remember when the then Lord Chancellor introduced them from Scotland some years ago—an alien import into the British legal system—to cries of protest from the Law Society and from individual barristers. I would go further and have contingency fees. The legal profession must be able to compete in any way that it finds appropriate. The problem is that we are faced with an untried system and we do not know what consequences it will have. It is being put forward as a replacement for a system that is working and which protects the vulnerable.

My hon. Friend the Minister claims that the Government's proposals will open up justice to a range of people who are now excluded from it because at

present the legal system is pricing itself out of use by the people, even those with substantial means. The fact remains, however, that conditional fees, as a replacement, are untried. My hon. Friend has no authority for advancing such an argument. We do not know how conditional fees are working since they have been introduced. We do not know of the problems that ensue.

Mr. Dismore: I specialised as a personal injury lawyer for 19 years. There have been conditional fees for the past two years and the system has been working extremely well, but I accept my hon. Friend's argument that they may not be suitable for every type of case. He may not be aware, however, that John Monks of the TUC, while speaking to representatives of the insurance industry on 3 November, made an interesting proposal that will be advanced to the Lord Chancellor, and that is to extend the trade union legal aid scheme to all people who are injured at work. Trade union schemes are a success story and they are not dependent on legal aid. Perhaps my hon. Friend will care to reflect on these points.

Mr. Mitchell: I encourage the extension of the trade union legal aid scheme: it is obviously important. However, neither that scheme nor conditional fees can replace the substantial sums in legal aid that will be taken away. People who do not belong to a trade union and who are not able to get access to conditional fees will be particularly vulnerable.

It must be proved to me that conditional fees are not only working—I did not expect them to be a disastrous failure—but are working for the benefit of the people. All that we have is the research undertaken by the Policy Studies Institute, which involved 200 cases seen from the solicitors' and not the consumers' point of view. How difficult is it for consumers to obtain legal aid? What barriers are put in their way? How much are solicitors proposing to charge? How many cases were turned away because solicitors would not take them up? We know nothing of all that. All that we have is a study of 190 or so cases and the fees charged: we have nothing from the users' point of view. It is the users whom I am defending. It is wrong to put so much weight on conditional fees as an alternative to legal aid without any research.

Conditional fees are inherently loaded against the poor. Compensation cases incur substantial up-front costs, such as medical reports, which are expensive. Insurance premiums will be a substantial charge on the system. Insurance companies will want their own medical reports. A poor litigant will have to pay substantial up-front costs before he can even get his case to court. Present charges are £95 for road traffic accidents, £161 for personal injury cases, and a mere £15,000 for medical negligence cases, which are the most difficult. If insurance is to be required, it will load the odds against the poor. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will tell us that the Government will fund the insurance charges for litigants whose income is below a certain level. That would not solve the problem, but it would make the proposal more acceptable.

What cases will be taken? I am sure that conditional fees will work with a sure-fire winner, such as a simple, straightforward personal injury case, but it will be impossible for them to work in a medical negligence case, in drug cases and in consumer product cases. Cases of builders or hairdressers from hell will also be difficult. Conditional fees will not be available in such cases, because the odds will be loaded against them and in favour of cases that will obviously be successful.

What will be the effect on legal practices? Practices devoted to legal aid will be driven out. Only fat practices with large incomes will be able to finance conditional fee litigation, because they will not get a quick return. They will need a large case load to carry them through the lean years. Small practices that presently provide devoted service to legal aid cases do not have large enough case loads: they lack weight and fat, so cases will go to the large practices.

All that is predictable. It is essential for the Government to acknowledge those consequences. I do not want them to abolish legal aid, but if they are going to replace it by conditional fees there should be a period of transition during which the one can be developed to replace the other. Let us have a transitional phase so that we can see that it works. That is the only sensible way to protect the people. The Government propose a sudden, overnight transition. It will take years: there will be no sudden savings. Under a smokescreen of a tax on fat-cat lawyers—with which I totally sympathise—legal aid will be abolished in compensation cases. That is not a responsible policy for any Government, but particularly not for a Labour Government whose commitment must be to protect and empower the poor and those who cannot afford legal services.

Legal aid was becoming expensive. Like the common agricultural policy—which the Government do not criticise much—it is demand led. However, there are ways of dealing with that problem short of abolition. We should consider alternative provisions, such as competition by employed solicitors, or an attack on the restrictive practices of the Bar, which enormously drive up expenses in court cases. It is interesting to note that Sir Peter Middleton has pointed out that these reforms will not damage the incomes of those at the Bar: it is obviously important to reassure the Bar that it will be protected against these changes. We could allow the Crown Prosecution Service to use its own barristers rather than force them to employ outside barristers. More paralegals could be used: legal aid for mediation is not proposed. The Government should not kick away the support provided for the people until they have provided an adequate, proven alternative to protect even more people more efficiently and economically. That is the prime need.

I hope that, as he clarifies Government policy, my hon. Friend will reassure me. The Lord Chancellor used a worrying phrase when he said that it is unfair for the middle classes to pay for poorer people to have services that they cannot afford themselves. Is that the basic new Labour principle behind this reform?

1.45 pm

Mr. David Lock (Wyre Forest): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for allowing me to speak in the debate. I want to bring a number of points to the Minister's attention, and to seek his assurance that they will be considered when his Department discusses publicly funded litigation.

I broadly welcome the commitment to conditional fees. They will give unity of commercial purpose between the lawyer and the client, and ensure that they are both striving towards the same goal. They will also open up

[Mr. David Lock]

the courts to many who find the doors closed to them at present. It cannot be acceptable for the state to finance only those cases involving a sufficiently bad risk that no commercial practitioner would touch them with a bargepole.

There will have to be insurance against losing the case and having to pay the other side's costs. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with the insurance industry to ensure that insurance products are available?

I urge my hon. Friend to retain the cost protection against the cost of enforcement presently enjoyed by those who qualify for legal aid. I also ask him to bear in mind the cases, such as housing or human rights cases, in which the main aim of the litigation, even though it is a damages claim, is an injunction or interlocutory relief, so there is no final award of damages.

I urge my hon. Friend to make the 25 per cent. mark-up a statutory limit, or at least a statutory limit to be exceeded only in cases in which a taxing master has considered that the solicitors took an exceptional risk in undertaking the litigation in the first place.

1.47 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I speak as a slightly overweight rather than a fat-cat lawyer, who has had some experience in personal injury litigation. I also speak as one of the vice chairs of the all-party head injury group that meets regularly in the House. One of the valid concerns of that group is that firms of solicitors will not be able to carry the huge disbursements that are necessary to pursue medical negligence or personal injury cases. Typically, lawyers are reliant on medical reports and specialist reports, such as engineers' reports. They will also refer matters back and forth to counsel, all of which costs money.

Smaller firms will not be able to carry those disbursements. The people most at risk are those at the bottom of the pile, and they need to have their cases brought to court. My great fear is that, even with the best will in the world, no firm will be able to take up the cudgels on their behalf.

I hope and trust that the Minister, thoughtful as he always is, will deal with that aspect, because it worries me and many other lawyers. I understand that there is to be a lobby on this subject in the other place next week. I hope that all those who are interested will appear next Tuesday to make their voices heard. I am obliged to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for allowing me to make that brief point.

1.49 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) for raising such an important issue—even if he did appear to be playing a new role as the lawyer's friend.

From its creation in 1949, the legal aid scheme in England and Wales was vital in enabling people of limited means to enforce their legal rights, and in many ways it was one of the great successes of the welfare state; but, over the years, the scheme has become less and less able to fulfil its original ambitions. I hardly need rehearse the problems, as they are well known to all of us as constituency Members. Eligibility has fallen from 70 per cent. of households to fewer than 50 per cent., spending has outstripped inflation, although fewer people are being helped, and the average cost of cases has been rising and rising, with no way of stopping it or even slowing it down. That is why this Government will fundamentally reform legal aid.

Sadly, the legal profession has proved deeply conservative in the face of previous attempts at control or reform. I understand why it does not want an end to the present system of payment, as it delivers a healthy income, often largely from the taxpayer, irrespective of value for money. The trouble is that, despite huge expense, legal aid is costing more to do less. Civil legal aid has tripled in six years, to £671 million. Broadly, that means that the income from legal aid going to the legal profession has risen by 20 per cent. a year on average over the same period. While civil legal aid continued to rise last year, there were about 13,500 fewer acts of help. We simply cannot go on like that. I want to help more people, not fewer; I want legal aid to be directed to those with unmet legal needs. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees with that.

My right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor and I have concluded that—as the first step on the path of reform—because there are areas of unmet legal need but no extra money, legal aid should not be used where alternatives are as good or better. That is why we have decided that those claiming damages or making claims for money should generally use no-win, no-fee arrangements rather than legal aid.

My hon. Friend said that the measure had been introduced overnight. The change will be made, but, obviously, on the first day following it lawyers will continue to obtain their income from all the legal aid cases that they previously had. On the first day of the system, they will perhaps have one conditional-fee case; as the system develops, they will have more and more such cases and, clearly, lower income from legal aid. It will take some time: it is a process of transition. We will not make savings on the first day. Obviously, lawyers will subsequently have no legal aid cases, but the process will not happen overnight. The savings will take many years to work through into the system.

Unfortunately, the lawyers' response has been rapid and all too predictable. They say that the poor cannot use no-win, no-fee arrangements because they cannot afford either the up-front costs of investigating the merits of a case or the insurance against having to pay the other side's costs if they lose—an argument which my hon. Friend repeated. But are the current arrangements, under which the client is expected to meet those up-front costs, the only way of working? Let us go a step further and ask whether they are fair. I have some doubts, and as a result I shall invite the lawyers to consider the following proposition. Why should not lawyers absorb the up-front costs of investigating the merits, bear the risk of the other side's costs and simply factor those into the pricing structure of their overall business?

There have always been lawyers who have taken on cases on the informal understanding that they will not be paid for their work if they do not win. Since 1995, lawyers have also been able to charge their clients a "success fee" on top of their normal prices if they do win. There are few areas of commerce or business in which some money

is not put at risk to realise an overall positive return. Why should lawyers in business in the private sector be any different? It may mean that only efficient, professionally competent and busy firms will be able to offer the agreements that we are discussing, but is that not a good thing? Is it not precisely what my hon. Friend's conveyancing reforms achieved, for the benefit of the consumer? His proposals fundamentally changed the way in which conveyancing operated, because he was not afraid to consider alternatives to the existing traditional arrangements. I hope that he will approach our proposals for reform in the same spirit.

It is claimed that conditional fees will not cover some cases that legal aid currently supports, particularly those with a poor prospect of success. I do not consider it fair to help the less well off to sue under legal aid provisions in cases in which the great majority—whose taxes help to pay for legal aid—could not themselves sue. I also cannot see why it is objectionable to keep weak cases out of the courts.

It has been deeply disappointing to observe the speed with which, in the last three weeks, leading lawyers have rushed to use the example of children who were brain damaged at birth to demonstrate that our plans are wrong. They argue that those children, who would receive legal aid now, would not be able to arrange a conditional fee agreement because of the difficulty of their cases. I find it distressing that they need to use those cases in their arguments, or to adopt a moral high ground as if the Government had no regard for the children or their parents.

Mr. Mitchell: Is it true?

Mr. Hoon: I shall go on to deal with that.

Those cases are emotive: they engage strong emotions in all of us. The fact that issues are painful, however, is no excuse for refusing to think the issues through; indeed, it emphasises our duty to do that. Whose interest is served if cases proceed on the slim hope that some benefit may accrue? Not, I suspect, that of the parents, for whom the trauma of unsuccessful and pointless litigation will be added to the trauma of the original damage to the child. Nor will such action serve the interests of the health authority, which has to divert effort and resources to meet the claims, or that of sick people whose care may suffer because of the money diverted to fight cases. Meanwhile, the taxpayer is asked to fund the child's lawyers, and when—as most often happens—the litigation fails, the only people who have profited are the lawyers. They do not do so out of malice or malevolence; nevertheless, they alone stand to gain regardless of the outcome. Is that in the interests of the sick and the injured? Is that the best use that we can make of scarce public money?

The issues are difficult and painful, and I would prefer not to face them; but they must be faced. It must be said that we can no longer allow weak cases to be taken up by lawyers and paid for by the taxpayer irrespective of the cost, and the Government have the right and the duty to say so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) raised the important question of insurance. We will certainly look at the ways in which insurance may be available in such circumstances. As I have said, however, I think that in the first place it is a responsibility of lawyers in business and private practice to consider bearing the costs for themselves.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): If conditional fees are introduced, will the insurance premiums of those who currently qualify for legal aid be paid by the legal aid fund, and will the fund pay the costs of investigating a case and its merits?

Mr. Hoon: It is for the lawyers to consider whether they should absorb those costs up front as a cost of doing business. If we receive persuasive evidence that that is totally impossible, we may take other considerations into account; in the first place, however, I want lawyers to consider their businesses, and this is a business that they are in.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby raised the question whether our action was motivated solely by the need to cut legal aid expenditure, and driven by the Treasury. I emphasise that that is not the case. We will not spend less than is currently contained in the published expenditure plans covering the next three years, but we shall not continue to pay millions more to lawyers to provide ever fewer people with help. The poor can rest safe in the knowledge that they will be able to benefit from conditional fees in money recovery cases while benefiting from the existing legal aid budget for other cases such as those involving family law.

In the longer term, we intend to reform the legal aid scheme further by buying legal services under contract. We will transform the way in which legal aid operates. For too long it has been simply a bill-paying machine, paying lawyers on demand for the work that they choose to do. Instead, it should become a positive system for buying the services that people need. We will establish a system of contracting whereby the Legal Aid Board will buy services from people other than lawyers, such as advice agencies and mediators, and will make suppliers compete in terms of quality and price. That will allow us to help more people pound for pound.

Contracting will give us power to direct services to those in most need, taking account of local demand and the best way of meeting it. That is already a developing reality. The Legal Aid Board is already contracting with agencies such as the citizens advice bureaux and lawyers for legal advice and assistance. The first regional legal services committee has been set up to liaise with local people on local priorities. Here is the beginning of the development of community legal services, and we will move quickly to make it a reality. As elsewhere in Government, we are maintaining our manifesto promises.

I know that my hon. Friend would like a national legal service to be established. Obviously, we want everyone to have access to legal advice, but our preferred approach of delivering services through contracts offers us the flexibility to purchase services in ways that best take account of local conditions. It may well be that when contracting takes place with a firm with high volumes of work—in Grimsby, say—it will be possible in some fields to buy services under a block contract with a unit price per case while in a market town, perhaps in rural Lincolnshire, where there is less volume, cases may have to be paid for on a different and more individual basis. Again, in some areas of legal practice—or in some local

[Mr. Hoon]

circumstances—it may be better to pay for a salaried service, or to buy the time of a supplier rather than a volume of cases. What is more, as the world changes and demand on legal aid and ways of meeting it also change, contracting will allow us to keep the delivery systems up to date. Our proposals will allow for a wide range of flexible services.

The proposals also allow us to refocus legal aid on the problems of the less well off—on the problems of those who need the law to help them to struggle out of social or economic exclusion. I want legal aid to be aimed at social welfare issues and matters of public interest. The diversion of most money claims to conditional fees will help, because we can then use the money that would have been used up in providing traditional legal aid for civil litigation to tackle more effectively issues such as housing, debt, employment, welfare benefits and immigration, and matters of broad public interest.

With legal aid delivered through contracts, we can decide how much to spend each year. For the first time, Ministers will be properly accountable to the House for how much they spend and on what services. The Government will be accountable for how much they spend on legal aid, and how much they spend on other public services such as health and education. As my hon. Friend said, at present legal aid is demand led—

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Job Creation

1. **Ms Lawrence:** What progress has been made by the Welsh Development Agency in meeting its target in respect of jobs created being based outside the eastern M4 corridor and the A55 corridor. [12375]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Ron Davies): One of the WDA's strategic targets for 1997–98 is to create or to safeguard 12,500 jobs within Wales, of which not less than 50 per cent. should be outside the eastern M4 and A55 corridors. The agency recorded 7,870 jobs created or safeguarded up to the end of September, of which 4,018—or 51 per cent.—were outside the eastern corridors. Recently, I met the agency's board and told it of my particular concern about the Pembrokeshire economy.

Ms Lawrence: Will my right hon. Friend continue to keep it in mind that, in recent years, parts of Wales have suffered a battering, particularly my constituency of Preseli Pembrokeshire? Defence establishments and a Gulf oil refinery there have closed and the power station in neighbouring Pembroke has also been shut down. Will he do all that he can to bring inward investment to west Wales to tackle the local economic crisis?

Mr. Davies: I most certainly will. I am conscious of the fact that unemployment in my hon. Friend's constituency is 50 per cent. higher than the Welsh average. It is important that we use the resources that are available to us as effectively as we can. I have made it clear that the Welsh Office, the WDA, training and enterprise councils and local authorities should work together in partnership. That team approach is the only way to extend economic prosperity not only to Pembrokeshire but to the whole of Wales.

Mr. Öpik: Will the Minister give us all an assurance that, as the WDA examines reconfiguring itself in relation to regional development agencies and so forth, all Members representing parts of Wales will be able to make an active contribution to that debate?

Mr. Davies: I have had discussions with the WDA and it is already discussing with the Land Authority for Wales and the Development Board for Rural Wales the configuration of the new economic powerhouse. As the hon. Gentleman already knows, I am more than prepared at any time to listen to any representations that he, or any other parliamentary colleague, wishes to make to me.

Mr. Denzil Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, surprisingly, one of the main impediments to the attraction of large inward investment to south-west Wales has been the shortage of large flat and suitable sites? Will he ensure co-ordination between the WDA, the Welsh Office and local authorities so that that impediment is removed?

Mr. Davies: I most certainly will. My right hon. Friend knows that the Velindre site, in which he has taken a particularly close interest, and the Cleddau Bridge site are two of the strategic sites that have been identified. I shall do all that I can to ensure that those sites are promoted for large inward investment.

Mr. Evans: It is all very well for the Secretary of State to talk about WDA targets for attracting inward investment away from the A55 and M4 corridors, but an article in one of today's newspapers mentions a damaging row between himself and the President of the Board of Trade about who should have the final say on aid packages to attract inward investment. Therefore, will the Secretary of State for Wales clear up this issue: who does have the final say over inward investment issues? Is it himself or the President of the Board of Trade, or will it be the Assembly?

Mr. Davies: The targets of which the hon. Gentleman is so scornful were set by my predecessor as Secretary of State for Wales, who is now leader of the Conservative party. I am quite happy to tell the hon. Gentleman the Government's position. It was clearly set out in the White Paper, which was endorsed in September. There will be an agreed relationship between the Department of Trade and Industry, the Welsh Office and the Scottish Office—a concordat will be established. That will be the basis on which the relationship between the DTI, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament will operate.

Education

2. **Mr. Caton:** If he will make a statement on the progress of legislation affecting education in Wales. [12376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): The Government have already brought in legislation to fulfil their election pledge to phase out the assisted places scheme. In addition, we shall shortly present to Parliament legislation containing measures on higher and further education and on raising standards of education for every pupil in schools in Wales.

Mr. Caton: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. He will know of the tremendous economic significance for south-west Wales of Swansea university and Swansea institute. Is he aware of the great concern among academics and other employees in those centres of learning about the current financial position? That was reflected in a letter that all Welsh Members of Parliament received from the heads of the higher education institutions in Wales. They warn of dire consequences if the current shortfall in finance continues. I do not think that they are crying wolf—what does my hon. Friend think?

Mr. Hain: I visited Swansea university last Friday. It is a fine university. Under the Conservative Government, universities in Wales faced a growing financial crisis. That is why I am pleased—

Mr. Ancram: Here it comes.

Mr. Hain: Just wait for it. I am pleased to announce for next year an additional £10 million for higher education in Wales. That new investment will match proportionately

the package announced in England recently. I hope that this money, allocated despite constraints on public spending, will show that the new Labour Government backs Welsh universities. They are critical to our objective of building a high-quality, world-beating economy in Wales.

Mr. Dafis: Does the Minister agree that education will be one of the main priorities—if not the main priority—for the Welsh Assembly? Is there not an opportunity to design an education system, educational policies and patterns of provision in Wales that are distinctive and that correspond to Welsh needs? I think in particular of curricula as well as organisation. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Welsh Assembly will be seriously empowered in influencing the pattern of education provision in Wales from 1999 onwards?

Mr. Hain: Yes, I can confirm that. The new Government have made an auspicious start by publishing the first-ever education White Paper for Wales covering schools. Next year, we shall publish the first-ever education White Paper covering lifelong learning. That is a sign of our intention to establish a distinctive educational agenda for Wales that meets the interests and values of Wales.

Mr. Alan Williams: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about the additional money for higher education in Wales. Is it new money, or is it money from elsewhere in the education budget? If it is from elsewhere in the budget, where is it coming from?

Mr. Hain: It is not money from elsewhere in the education budget—it is additional money, which has come in part from the up-front funding from the introduction of student fees for tuition.

Welsh Assembly

3. **Mr. Baldry:** If he will make a statement on the outcome of the vote on a Welsh Assembly. [12377]

Mr. Ron Davies: The Government put their proposals to the people of Wales in a vote on 18 September. I am delighted to remind the hon. Gentleman that the people of Wales recorded a yes vote. There was a massive 30 per cent. increase in the yes vote compared with 1979. The swings in the south and south-east were truly remarkable, from barely 12 per cent. in favour in West and Mid Glamorgan in 1979 to more than 55 per cent. in favour now. In Gwent and South Glamorgan, the yes vote rose from well under 10 per cent. to more than 40 per cent. We now have a unique opportunity to improve the governance of Wales and I look forward to introducing legislation at the earliest opportunity. We have a mandate, but it is important that we continue to broaden and deepen our support.

Mr. Baldry: Does the Secretary of State accept that—although he tried so hard in that answer—almost three quarters of people in Wales did not support the proposals, which can hardly be described as the settled will of the people of Wales? In those circumstances, it must be right for the legislation to be scrutinised carefully. Will he give an undertaking that any Bill dealing with the proposals will be introduced in the House and not in another place, and that it will be considered, as a constitutional Bill, on the Floor of the House? Is it not surprising that we have yet to see the Bill published, and is that not a rather dismal reflection on the stewardship of the matter?

Mr. Davies: Not at all. The hon. Gentleman raises a number of issues, and I shall try to deal with them. In the referendum of 18 September 1997, 25 per cent. of the people of Wales voted against the proposals. He has no basis on which to claim that those who did not vote in the referendum were expressing opposition. I cannot give him the guarantee that he requests on introducing the Bill into one or another House, because that is a matter for the Government's business managers. I can tell him, however, that I am anxious that there should be proper scrutiny of the legislation as it passes through the House. I have always made it clear that I expect the Bill to be published by the end of this month. I made that statement at the start of the legislative process, and I am happy to repeat it today. I expect the Bill to be published before the end of this month.

Mr. Barry Jones: Does my right hon. Friend expect the Assembly to meet in north Wales—for example, in the county of Flintshire? Does he expect the Assembly to have plans to improve road and rail communications between the north and the south, bearing in mind that many people in the north think of Cardiff as a faraway place?

Mr. Davies: Those are interesting questions, but they deal with matters that the Assembly itself will have to decide. The purpose of devolution is to empower the Assembly to deal with those matters relating to Wales that are best dealt with in Wales. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), is examining ways in which we can improve road and rail links between north and south Wales—an important matter. As for the Assembly meeting in north Wales, it will have the right to choose where to meet. I certainly expect the Assembly to have its headquarters in Cardiff, but there will be a north Wales committee. The Assembly may well decide to meet in various parts of Wales when it wishes to examine matters of current concern.

Mr. Wigley: I congratulate the Secretary of State on the historic result of the referendum and the establishment of a Welsh national assembly. Does he agree that one of the main reasons why people voted yes was the Assembly's potential for developing the economy of Wales, not least in the context of reorganisation of the Welsh Development Agency and other agencies dealing with industry?

In that context, will the Secretary of State give the House a categorical assurance that the powers that have been enjoyed by the Welsh Development Agency to attract inward investment to Wales will not be undermined by the action of other Ministers, and that the power will be there to do the much-needed job of raising Wales's gross domestic product from the current 83 per cent. nearer to 100 per cent? We are at the bottom of the league table of regions and countries in Great Britain, and we shall need those powers, and more, to get a solution.

Mr. Davies: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman—I congratulate him on achieving that new status—that the

economic future of Wales was central to the devolution debate. I pay tribute to the work done by members of Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats in achieving the yes vote, which was an historic performance by all three progressive parties in Wales.

The right hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the powers that will be available to the Assembly to attract inward investment and deal with other economic development matters. I remind him of the statement made in "A Voice for Wales"—the White Paper on which the referendum campaign was based—which was:

"Financial assistance to industry will remain subject to common UK guidelines and consultation arrangements to be set out in a published concordat."

That is my policy, and that is the Government's policy. I strongly support it.

Mr. Rogers: Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be far better if Opposition Members ceased to refight the battles of this summer, accepted that the people of Wales have asked for a Welsh Assembly and contributed constructively to the establishment of a democratic institution which we all want to work? Does he agree that there is no point in fighting old battles and that we have to look forward?

Mr. Davies: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. He has for many years made known his views known on Welsh devolution. I am delighted that he, like many other people in Wales who had reservations about the proposals, now accepts the outcome. I agree that it is a great pity that the Conservative party in England does not talk to the Conservative party in Wales. The Conservative party in Wales, what little there is, has now accepted that there is no turning back the clock. It wants to play a constructive part in building the new democracy, and it is a pity that Conservative Front Benchers do not learn some lessons from it.

Mr. Ancram: Does the Secretary of State recall that, on the morning after the vote, the Prime Minister scrubbed his celebration visit to Cardiff—which, incidentally, had voted no—and in Downing street told journalists that he would now listen to the people of Wales? Does the Secretary of State accept that, whatever else they might do, the votes revealed the real and legitimate fears of people in certain parts of Wales that a Welsh Assembly would permanently ride roughshod over their interests? What listening has been done since 18 September, and what fundamental changes are proposed to the plans—or was it just one more bit of prime ministerial hollow rhetoric that he will ignore by riding roughshod over the voice of the people of Wales?

Mr. Davies: I am afraid that the right hon. Gentleman is stuck in a time warp. Politics has changed, and the vast majority of people in Wales now understand that there will be a new democracy. No prime ministerial visit was arranged for Wales for 19 September. What I remember from 19 September was my announcing the Government's determination to proceed with the devolution plans on the basis that it was a very good morning for Wales.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's second point, I propose to create an advisory committee, which will consist of representatives of all political parties in Wales. I am delighted that members of Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrat and Labour parties, as well as representatives of business, industry and the voluntary sector in Wales, have all undertaken to co-operate in the process. I hope that, if the right hon. Gentleman is sincere in his protestations about building a consensus and listening to people with reservations, he will, in turn, be prepared to play a full part in the process.

Mr. Donald Anderson: Is it not good that we have an example of yet another manifesto commitment being delivered and endorsed by the people? Is there not now a new obligation on the Conservative party to recognise that the people of Wales have endorsed the proposal and an obligation on the other place to recognise that it is not elected and should have no place in seeking fundamentally to alter what was proposed by the Government and endorsed in the election and the referendum?

Mr. Davies: I am delighted to be able to agree with my hon. Friend. I refer him to an article in the *Western Mail* this morning, which appeared under the heading "Devo-vote linked to surge in optimism". The London editor of the newspaper says:

"A wave of optimism is sweeping across Wales as consumers indulge themselves in a pro-devolution spending boom celebration".

The article reports an economist as saying:

"The pro-devolution votes have unleashed an unprecedented wave of optimism in both Wales and Scotland".

The only people who are going to be left behind are those on the Opposition Front Bench.

Special Advisers

4. **Mr. Nicholls:** What role his special advisers played during the referendum campaign in Wales. [12378]

Mr. Ron Davies: My special advisers played an active role supporting my ministerial colleagues and me throughout the referendum campaign. Their wide-ranging duties included analysing policy, advising on presentational matters and liaising with Members of Parliament from my party and those in other parties and campaigning groups in Wales that supported the Government's policy. They were both pleased to be on the winning side.

Mr. Nicholls: Would not the right hon. Gentleman's account of the work of political advisers in the campaign be fuller if he drew attention to the fact that one of his special advisers telephoned Blaenau Gwent council, asking it to put pressure on the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith), saying that if he did not co-operate, access would be denied—or possibly even granted—to the right hon. Gentleman? Is not that attitude to constitutional propriety more reminiscent of the late Mr. Fawkes, whose happy demise we shall be celebrating today? Does the right hon. Gentleman have confidence in a verdict that gave him such a very small majority, obtained only through a massive expenditure of public money and by strong arming his hon. Friends?

Mr. Davies: I am afraid that the allegations to which the hon. Gentleman is referring are ancient history. Let me remind him that both my special advisers were properly

employed in line with the Cabinet Office advice of 20 May. As I have said, they carried out a wide range of duties. The hon. Gentleman will be particularly interested to know that, on those occasions when it would have been unwise of me to use my car, my special advisers arranged taxis for me.

House Building

5. **Mr. Prior:** What representations he has received concerning the building of extra houses in Wales. [12379]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Win Griffiths): I have received the Welsh Local Government Association's housing manifesto for Wales, which urges an increase in social housing provision.

Mr. Prior: Does the Minister agree with the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning that the green belt is up for grabs?

Mr. Griffiths: There is no such thing as the green belt being up for grabs in Wales. Under current planning guidance in Wales, there is no green belt. However, earlier this summer, I wrote to all Welsh planning authorities asking them to consider those places where it would be appropriate to have green belts because of the danger of one settlement running into another.

Mr. Hanson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the release of capital receipts by the Government will provide a great boost to the building of local authority homes, if local authorities wish to build? Will he welcome that release of capital receipts for authorities such as Flintshire, which is ploughing money into new house building and refurbishments this year?

Mr. Griffiths: Under the capital receipts initiative, more than £9 million will be available this year and more than £33 million in the next financial year. Local authorities will be able to put forward proposals on how that money might be spent. They will be able to provide more new houses if they act together with housing associations, bringing in private capital. One way or another, the capital receipts initiative is good news for housing and people in Wales.

Beef Crisis

6. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** When he last met representatives of the farming unions to discuss the beef crisis in Wales. [12380]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend and I met both farming unions in Wales on Friday 30 May and again just over a week ago. Welsh Office Ministers and officials have had discussions with both unions on numerous occasions.

Mr. Jones: I thank the Minister for that reply. I also thank him for his contribution to this morning's debate. I particularly welcome the Government's initiative on attempting to lift the beef ban, which was made more difficult by the actions of the previous Conservative Government. Does he recognise that there are immediate concerns in the beef industry about the over-30-months scheme, the green pound and the value of sterling? Can the Government do anything in the short term to alleviate those real problems?

Mr. Griffiths: I can give no categorical, cast-iron assurances of significant action in the short term, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that, although we are not yet convinced that there is a proven case for tackling any aspect of the green pound revaluation, we have given an undertaking to continue reviewing that. We have until next January to make final decisions on most aspects of the green pound revaluation. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we shall continue to keep that under review.

Mr. Gareth Thomas: Is my hon. Friend aware that many farmers in Wales deplore the Opposition's negative attitude to Europe? Many farmers know that agricultural policy is inextricably linked with European policy. Does he agree that it is high time that the Opposition took a more realistic approach to Europe?

Mr. Griffiths: That is certainly the case. It is a pity that the previous Government were so anti-European—virtually at war with Europe. This Government have much improved relationships with Europe. They will be further improved next week, when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales will visit Brussels for discussions with, among others, the Agriculture Commissioner.

Madam Speaker: Order. Let me remind hon. Members that they can ask only questions for which the Government are responsible. The Government have no responsibility for what the Opposition do.

Higher Education

7. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** What meetings he has had with students to discuss higher education in Wales. [12381]

Mr. Hain: I am due to meet the president of the National Union of Students, Wales at the beginning of December. I recently met a deputation of students in my constituency.

Mr. Simpson: I am sure that, in addition to many hon. Members, many students in Wales will be interested by the Minister's answer to Question 2, in which he admitted that a large portion of the money that was to be allocated to universities in Wales would come from raising tuition fees for students. Is that not absolute hypocrisy, given that, during the general election campaign, the Prime Minister said categorically that student fees in higher education would not be raised?

Mr. Hain: The Prime Minister did not say that. It is a bit rich for Conservatives to complain about the situation in higher education. They reduced many of our universities in Wales to near bankruptcy. Under the previous financial regime, they saddled students with huge debts. We are introducing a new system that is fair to students, to parents, to universities and to our country. It will establish higher education on a sound basis and give our students the opportunities that they deserve.

Mr. Touhig: I believe that my hon. Friend is aware of a letter from the Department for Education and

Employment to his office in Cardiff alleging serious irregularities in the use of European social fund moneys at Gwent tertiary college. Will he investigate those allegations and make a statement to the House?

Mr. Hain: I am aware of the allegations. My officials are keeping me informed about the progress of the investigation.

Local Government Finance

8. **Mr. Livsey:** What steps he will take to assist local authorities facing reductions in local services. [12382]

Mr. Win Griffiths: We are well aware of the financial pressures on local government in Wales and will do what we can in the forthcoming revenue settlement to recognise them, although the room for manoeuvre in 1998–99 is relatively small.

Mr. Livsey: Will the Minister consider removing the cap on local government expenditure in Wales to enable local communities to benefit from not having their services under the extreme pressure that they face at present?

Mr. Griffiths: We in the Welsh Office have had a constructive debate with the Welsh Local Government Association and, in particular, with the Welsh Consultative Council on Local Government Finance. A package of proposals has been put forward to which Councillor Shaw from Powys county council made an invaluable contribution. We are considering those proposals. On the basis of our last meeting, we believe that there will be a way forward in this difficult year and that, while it will not lead to the removal of capping, there will be sufficient room in the system to keep everybody happy at least for the coming year.

NHS Trusts

9. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** What progress has been made by his Department in reducing the number of NHS trusts in Wales. [12383]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The Welsh Office is currently consulting on proposals to create a single ambulance trust for Wales, and hon. Members for Welsh constituencies will have received a copy of the consultation document. In addition, a finalised plan for reviewing the number and shape of the other NHS trusts in Wales is due to be completed by April 1999. The document was distributed on 30 September. A copy of the project plan has also been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. How will he get round the problem that will be caused in the Cardiff area by the likely proposal to merge the two big hospital trusts, University Hospital of Wales and Llandough, given that their expected deficit at the end of this financial year will be more than £7.5 million? That is equivalent to 35 per cent. of the total expected deficit of all the trusts in Wales. Does my hon. Friend agree that in the Cardiff area it is not so much a question of NHS trusts as NHS bust?

Mr. Griffiths: I have every confidence that the management of both trusts will be able to bring the projected deficits down this year and will continue to ensure that their trusts perform well for their patients and in terms of financial efficiency. As for which trusts may or may not combine, or the shape of services after 1999, I have no predictions to make.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The Prime Minister was asked—

Q1. **Mr. Evans:** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 5 November. [12355]

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, I launched a White Paper setting out the Government's commitment to sustainable development and the elimination of international poverty. I shall have meetings with ministerial colleagues and others later in the day.

Mr. Evans: Will the Prime Minister confirm that his decision to give away the essential British veto over European research matters now means that he will not be able to block plans by other European Union countries to increase the budget by 24 per cent., which means a £2 billion increase in that budget? Will not the British taxpayer now have to pay higher taxes because of his betrayal of the British national interest?

The Prime Minister: No. I do not think that I have ever heard such nonsense. I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman did not make a case for a referendum on the Amsterdam treaty, but perhaps that is because, a couple of days ago, Lord Howe said:

"Fortunately, the public has reacted to this proposal with complete indifference."

[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] The simple answer is no. We protected the national interest fully at Amsterdam in contrast to the negative, foolish isolationism of the previous Government.

Helen Jones: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there will be widespread welcome for the first White Paper on international development to be published for 20 years? Will he tell the House whether it will deal with the needs of children, millions of whom die under the age of five because of poverty?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is an important White Paper. It will allow us to put our aid and development programmes on a sound footing. In particular, it means that any money that is spent abroad by this country is spent on the basis of long-term programmes that work not just to the benefit of those individual countries but for the long-term benefit of the developing and developed world.

Mr. Hague: Has the Prime Minister seen reports that the European Commission wants to extend to tens of thousands of smaller British firms regulations that now apply only to large multinationals? Can he confirm that British businesses are opposed to that? Can he confirm that the Government are opposed to that? Now that he has

signed away our veto by signing up to the social chapter, can he also confirm that there may be nothing that he can do to stop that?

The Prime Minister: No. We have already made our position clear; we do not believe that such extensions are sensible. It is simply a Commission proposal at present. Let me tell the right hon. Gentleman that the biggest extension of qualified majority voting was agreed by the Government of which he was a member.

Mr. Hague: I am asking the Prime Minister about the social chapter. Given that he is opposed to these regulations, does he now regret signing away our veto? Can he give small businesses a guarantee that he will prevent those regulations coming into force—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: As I have already made clear to the right hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* As I have already made clear, joining the social chapter is manifestly in Britain's interests because this side of the House does not believe that treating people fairly and getting a good deal for the country are inconsistent objectives.

Mr. Hague: Now that we have had the old propaganda, let us have an answer. Can the Prime Minister give a guarantee that he will prevent the regulations to which he is opposed and to which British small businesses are opposed—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: We have already made it clear that this is a Commission proposal and that we do not believe that it should be extended. The right hon. Gentleman is making a pretty transparent attempt to hide the fact that his party is hopelessly divided on the issue. Indeed, just a few weeks ago, the Leader of the Opposition said:

"The days of disunity, factions and wings, groups within groups . . . is over"—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House does not have to listen, but hon. Members must be heard. Let us hear what the Prime Minister has to say.

The Prime Minister: I thought that they would enjoy hearing the words of the Leader of the Opposition. He said:

"The days of disunity . . . is over. It's finished. It's out. And as long as I am leader it will never come back."

I do not think that we need lessons from the right hon. Gentleman in leadership.

Mr. Hague: It is no good the Prime Minister giving the answers he prepared last week to the questions he is being asked this week. If he has such faith in his negotiating power, will he make a better fist of negotiating in the social chapter than he made of the border control agreement? Does he not regret boasting to the House in June that if we wanted to opt into the border control agreement no other country could block it? Now that the Foreign Secretary has said that that was a misunderstanding and other countries could block it, is it not clear that what the Prime Minister said in the House was wrong?

The Prime Minister: For 18 years the Conservatives failed to get a deal on border controls. It is this party that got the deal on border controls and, for the first time, it is a legally binding deal. I simply say this to the right hon. Gentleman: when are we going to hear about this referendum?

Mr. Hague *rose—[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Mr. Leslie, this is not a football match.

Mr. Hague: We have got used to the Prime Minister dodging questions at these sessions, but we have not been used to its becoming more pathetic as the questions go on. The fact is that he went to Amsterdam, signed away this country's legal rights by accident and came back with a letter saying, "Don't worry about it." That is not very good for a lawyer, is it? After all this, is it not obvious that the assurances that he offered businesses about European regulation before the election are like the assurances he gave to students and to people with pension funds—absolutely worthless?

The Prime Minister: After the past couple of weeks, I think that business prefers our position on Europe to that of the Conservatives. I simply say to the right hon. Gentleman that we not only got a good deal for this country in Europe; we managed to set the country on a different path in our relations with Europe that allows us to play a part in leading in Europe, not to be perpetually isolated in Europe. Whatever he may say, I think that a large number of people who support the Conservative party want this country to behave sensibly in Europe—and we will.

Mr. Pike: Will my right hon. Friend recognise that it is hypocritical of some Conservative Members to decry the fact that we are not able to take into account the wind chill factor in cold weather payments when, within the past 12 months, they have blocked a Bill that would have done exactly that? Is it not true that, as a result of our changes to value added tax on fuel, we have given a far better benefit to every pensioner in the country than the wind chill measure would have given them?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Conservative party broke the link with earnings for pensioners, it would end the tax relief on pension contributions, and it was responsible for the greatest pensions scandal—the mis-selling of pensions—the country has ever seen. The Conservatives promised that they would never raise VAT and then doubled it. My party promised to cut VAT and kept the promise.

Mr. Ashdown: Will the Prime Minister confirm that one of the Government's key commitments is to equal opportunities throughout the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Mr. Ashdown: I am grateful for that confirmation. Will the right hon. Gentleman then tell me how that commitment is consistent with the fact that the Government are to require English, Welsh and Northern Irish students at Scottish universities to pay for their fourth year, whereas Scottish students and students from every other European country will not have to pay?

That means that students from the south of Ireland will have their fourth year in Scotland paid for by the British taxpayer whereas students from the north of Ireland will have to pay for it themselves. How does he justify that?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not entirely accurate. Students from inside the European Union but outside the United Kingdom last year numbered some 350; they will not be eligible for maintenance loans so they will be in a worse position than British students, whether English or from other parts of the United Kingdom.

Ms Ward: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that it remains the Government's intention to prohibit the introduction of the rapid draw lottery known as Pronto, based on the American system Keno? Does he agree that if it were introduced it would damage the national lottery and give rise to great concern about an increase in gambling?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that concern. I understand that the Home Secretary is considering a number of representations on the subject and will announce a decision shortly.

Q2. [12356] **Mr. Day:** Can the Prime Minister explain why, if someone commits murder and terrorist offences against the people of Bosnia British troops are dispatched to arrest him and bring him to trial, whereas if someone commits murder against the people of the United Kingdom and terrorises them for 25 years, all he will feel is the warmth and glow of a prime ministerial handshake?

The Prime Minister: It is difficult enough to achieve a settlement in Northern Ireland without that type of utter perversion of the truth. The plain fact is that we shall seek to bring terrorists to justice wherever they may be, but it is important that we try to seek a long-term settlement in Northern Ireland. I supported the Conservative Government through every difficult decision that they had to take on this issue because in the end that was manifestly in the interests of the country. I very much hope that the Conservative party can put aside party differences on this and do the same.

Ms Oona King: Is the Prime Minister aware that on this day in the Chamber in 1940 the then Prime Minister commended civilians on their courage during the first years of the second world war? Subsequently, 60,000 British civilians died in that war, 30,000 of them Londoners. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should provide an adequate memorial for the civilians who died? Will he therefore call in the planning application for the Hermitage site so that a fitting memorial can go up? If the poppies that we are all wearing today are to have any meaning, we must give those people a suitable memorial.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I cannot give a commitment on any particular planning application, but we shall obviously consider her representations carefully. As for the civilians who died during the war, everyone in this House—especially the generations of us who grew up after the war—realises the debt that we owe not just to the troops who died but to the civilians who gave their lives, often in difficult circumstances requiring the greatest courage.

Mr. Page: The Prime Minister will remember that just before the summer recess, in response to a question from a Conservative Member, he said that he thought that the green belt was a good thing. Is he aware that in Hertfordshire a recent poll carried out by the local council showed that 95 per cent. of those who responded agreed with him by rejecting Hertfordshire county council's structure plan to build on the green belt? Will the Prime Minister support the majority of Hertfordshire voters in their campaign against building on the green belt? Will he call in the plan and ask the county council to examine regeneration as a solution, rather than destroy the green belt in Hertfordshire?

The Prime Minister: I shall not comment on the application to which the hon. Gentleman has drawn attention. I recall the question that I was asked. I drew attention to the fact that the proposals about which I was being asked had been drawn up by the previous Government. Of course we support the green belt and it is important that any planning applications are considered in conjunction with our support.

Q3. [12357] **Mr. Savidge:** On law and order, does my right hon. Friend recognise the need not only to allay continuing and legitimate public fears but to discourage illegitimate vigilantism of the sort that my constituency suffered earlier this year, by introducing measures to protect the community from sex offenders who pose a continuing risk? Will the Prime Minister outline his plans to deal with that problem?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the range of powerful new measures we have already taken to improve the criminal justice system. He is also right to point out the public's concern about the risks posed by sex offenders who are not already subject to the Sex Offenders Act 1997. We shall therefore announce today new powers to protect the public from such sex offenders. Community protection orders will be applied to sex offenders whose conduct poses a serious threat to children and the public. I hope that those measures will go some way towards allaying the public's justifiable fear about these matters.

Q4. [12358] **Mr. Fallon:** May we now have a straight answer to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition's question? If the Prime Minister genuinely believes that the Commission's proposals for new regulations and penalties for the information and consultation of employees should not apply to British small businesses that employ as few as 50 employees, how can he guarantee that under the social chapter the proposals will not be applied to them?

The Prime Minister: I have made our position absolutely clear. Moreover, in the end the choice is whether we want to be part of the social chapter or not. This side of the House says, unhesitatingly, yes and I believe that the vast majority of British business wants a better, more constructive fresh start in Europe.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Following my right hon. Friend's meeting on sustainable development this morning, will he take this opportunity to reinforce the Government's commitment to a fully sustainable, integrated transport strategy? Is he aware that many parts of the country, including East Anglia, have suffered from severe

underinvestment in road and rail transport links over the past two decades? Following the Government's welcome review of transport and trunk road policies, what prospect can he offer those parts of the country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of transport policy as part of our policy of sustainable development. That is precisely why we have committed ourselves to our own proposals and targets and why we have been part of the European Union's commitment to proper binding targets for the long term. The Kyoto conference, which is coming up shortly, will provide a further opportunity for us to take international action. In the meantime, at the conclusion of our consultation on transport policy, I hope that we can offer for the first time the genuine prospect of a proper national integrated transport strategy, which has been overdue for a long, long time.

Q5. [12359] **Miss Widdecombe:** In view of the tremendous improvement in inward investment that the previous Government secured for this country through maintaining a flexible labour market—I welcome the cheer on the Labour Benches for it—will the Prime Minister now please answer a question that he has had a great many chances to answer? This is a simple question and he has had lots of time to go through his notes. Given that much of that flexibility will be removed under the social chapter, to which he has signed up, how will he guarantee to small businesses that they will not suffer from those inflexibilities?

The Prime Minister: There are no proposals under the social chapter to stop flexibility. That is the simple answer. We have a simple choice: we can be part of discussions in Europe or be shut out from them. That is precisely why British business would prefer us to be engaged in discussions that might affect it, rather than excluded from them. If the right hon. Lady wants to know what British business really fears about Europe, it fears the policy of her party, which she and the person sitting next to her—the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)—do not agree with.

Mr. Soley: We recognise the importance of the family to social structure and to individual welfare, and I know that my right hon. Friend is aware of the concern about the lack of integrated policies on the family under the previous Government. Can he tell us what this Government have done to bring about an integrated policy towards the family, bearing in mind the importance of that issue for Britain?

The Prime Minister: As I said at conference, we have set up a ministerial group that is looking at every aspect of family policy. Part of the reason we have laid such emphasis on getting the long-term unemployed back to work and on trying to deal with the problems of education in our education system is that those are two of the ways in which we can best strengthen family life. As we have made clear throughout, whether in the tax and benefit system or in any other area of policy, the family is an essential part of British society and we should do everything that we can to support it.

Q6. [12361] **Mrs. Gillan:** The small and medium businesses in this country have—*[Interruption.]* It is worth trying the question a different way round. Small and medium businesses in this country have already faced four interest rate rises and a raid on pensions under this Government. Will my right hon. Friend confirm—[HON. MEMBERS: "Come over, then."]Will the right hon. Gentleman—it is tough on this side—confirm that, under the Labour Government, those businesses, as well as having to deal with millennium compliance and prepare for the euro, will have to take on board the working time directive—[HON. MEMBERS: "Reading."]—the parental leave directive—[HON. MEMBERS: "Reading."]—part-time rights for workers—[HON. MEMBERS: "Reading."]—the burden of proof in sex discrimination, and now new workers councils? Would he advise business voters in Winchester and Beckenham to vote for such commercial suicide?

The Prime Minister: I know that it is tough on that side, but we will just have to disagree about the social chapter. I believe that many small businesses welcome our proposals, not least the cut in corporation tax to the lowest it has been, with particular reference to small businesses. I repeat—although I do not think that we will greatly advance the argument between us—that what business fears is a business community trying to do business with the rest of Europe and a Government who end up being isolated and separated from the rest of Europe. That is why, if the hon. Lady had the interests of business at heart, she should join us—as I thought for a moment she would—rather than continue to support the views of her party leadership, which are contrary to the best interests of business.

Mr. Stringer: I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that in 2002 the Commonwealth games will take place in Manchester. The games will bring jobs and prosperity to my constituency of Manchester, Blackley and to Manchester and the north-west generally. Has he considered to ways in which the games could be used to improve the image of our country internationally?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we certainly have considered that. It is tremendous for Manchester and for Britain that we will host the Commonwealth games in 2002. We are confident that they will be highly successful. The Government and the UK Sports Council are working closely with the Manchester team. There is an interdepartmental group to assist Manchester in the delivery of a successful event. We are delighted that Manchester is hosting the games. We know that they will be a great success and the Government will give them every support.

Q7. [12363] **Mrs. Ballard:** I am not going to ask the Prime Minister about small businesses. Exactly one year ago today, the then Leader of the Opposition described the national health service as being in a state of crisis and the Tories' spending plans as a sticking plaster to get them through the election. As hospital waiting lists are now increasing, and as the Department of Health confirmed today that expenditure this year will be less in real terms than it was under the Conservatives, how would the Prime Minister describe this Government's spending plans?

The Prime Minister: I would describe them in this way: we have allocated an extra £300 million this year—

that is a fact—and we will allocate another £1.2 billion next year over and above the Conservative spending plans. Of course I am aware that the health service and hospitals face very difficult times. We cannot put right in six months the problems of 18 years—we accept that—but this Government are committed to the national health service and we are starting, in difficult circumstances, to put more money into it.

The Liberal Democrats can call for more money for everything, but they do not have to deliver it. Labour has to deliver it, and we shall do that in the best way possible in the interests of the future of not just the health service, but the country.

Q8. [12360] **Mr. Gunnell:** Does the Prime Minister agree that, when schools develop excellence in some specialism, such as technology or languages, it is important that the wider community of local schools benefits also? How will the Government's policy ensure that help goes to the many and not just the few?

The Prime Minister: The purpose of the announcement that has been made today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment is to ensure that the benefits of specialist schools reach beyond those schools. The number of such schools will increase from 260 to about 330 by next September, when we will want to increase the number further. We hope to devote about £9 million in private sponsorship to developing those schools. It is precisely because we are insisting that those schools share their resources with the schools around them that we can say that the policy will benefit the many and not the few.

Mr. Trimble: Last Thursday it was four, by Monday it was 12, and by yesterday 20 workers were suspended without pay by Coats Viyella for wearing poppies. One of the 20 workers suspended is a veteran of the Falklands war. Does the Prime Minister agree that, when the House enacted the fair employment legislation it never intended it be used to produce this sort of result? Will he assure the House that the review of that legislation will ensure that this sort of thing never happens again and that British workers will never again be penalised for wearing poppies at work?

The Prime Minister: Of course I agree that people should not be penalised for wearing poppies. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that both traditions and both sides of the community in Northern Ireland want to support what happened in the second world war and realise that people of whatever religion made tremendous contributions in fighting and in winning that war.

Q9. [12364] **Mr. Mitchell:** I am sure that my right hon. Friend will join me in welcoming today's White Paper on international development. It is the first such paper for 20 years—so shamefaced were the Conservatives about their record of cutting aid from 0.5 per cent. of gross domestic product to 0.27 per cent. last year. The White Paper is doubly welcome because it puts the moral dimension back into aid by cutting prestige projects such as the Pergau dam and focusing on the poorest of the poor in those countries. Does my right hon. Friend agree also that aid will be undermined unless we reach agreement about debt and stop the debt treadmill in poor countries, which are spending an increasing proportion of their overseas earnings on debt repayments?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows that there will be a statement shortly on the Government's White Paper. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend that we must focus aid on the poorest countries while ensuring that it is not wasted on projects such as the Pergau dam—which was a scandal under the previous Government—but is spent in a way that contributes to countries' overall development.

My hon. Friend will know that the money that is raised in making the Commonwealth Development Corporation into a public-private partnership will go into aid and development, so that will increase our resources there. In relation to the debt burden, finance Ministers, under the prompting of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, agreed a series of measures to relieve debt in the developing world. We support that very strongly indeed.

Q11. [12366] **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** Does the Prime Minister agree that the United Kingdom is trading in an international—not just a European—arena? Is he further aware that we are highly regarded because of our relatively low-cost economy, which is growing, and that our unemployment is coming down, unlike most countries within Europe? Why does he seek to reverse that by signing up to European social chapter and other regulations? That may be popular in the Confederation of British Industry, but the CBI does not represent British industry. We do; and it does not want them.

The Prime Minister: I should congratulate the hon. Gentleman on, for the first time in my memory, being on his party's message. It was very well delivered, too. We are just going to have to disagree on the social chapter. The fact is that there are no measures in the social chapter that will cause problems for British business. That idea is absolute nonsense. We were told before the election, I seem to recall, that if Britain signed the social chapter half a million jobs would flood out of the country. It has all been nonsense. What is important is that we are part of the debate in Europe. The Government of this country—and this is in the interests of business—stand up for British interests best when they play a positive, constructive and forward-looking role. If the Conservative party does not learn that soon, it will spend a long time in opposition learning it.

International Development

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): With permission, Madam Speaker, I wish to make a statement about international development. I am today publishing a White Paper, entitled "Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century". It will be available in the Vote Office when I have finished speaking.

The White Paper sets out the Government's policies for the sustainable development of the planet. That requires greater progress in eliminating poverty. Nearly one in four of the people of the world live on the margins of human existence. That is morally repugnant and threatening to future security and stability. Our manifesto made it clear that we would give much greater priority to international development than the previous Administration. The creation of my Department, and the fact that it is headed by a Cabinet Minister, reflects that, as does the publication of the White Paper. It is the first White Paper on development for more than 20 years.

Considerable progress in poverty elimination is now possible. The past 50 years have seen great advances. On average, people live longer and in better health. More people have clean water. More are literate. More people have escaped from poverty in the past 50 years than in the previous 500 years. However, because of population growth, more people are living in abject poverty than ever before.

The challenge of development is to apply the lessons of success to enable the poor to work their way out of poverty. We are committing ourselves to refocus our international development efforts on poverty elimination. That can be achieved only through economic growth, which benefits the poor, and through measures that provide education and health care and enable the poor to develop their talents. As Michel Camdessus, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, said recently:

"We support high quality growth. This means growth that results in a permanent reduction in poverty and greater equality of economic opportunity."

We shall measure our progress against clear, internationally accepted targets that have been agreed at the great United Nations conferences and drawn together by the development committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The key target is to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. The targets also cover environmental conservation and human development. We want everyone in the world to have access to basic health care, education and clean water. The targets are challenging, but they are both affordable and achievable if we can mobilise sufficient political will in the world system to achieve what can be achieved.

We shall pursue the targets in partnership with developing countries that are committed to them. We shall offer such countries a longer-term commitment of support, more resources and greater flexibility in using those resources. Our aim is to ensure that good Governments succeed. The nature of our partnership will depend on the circumstances of each partner country and how we can best help. We shall also work in partnership with other donors and international institutions in pursuit of the targets. Britain has unique international links, which we intend to use actively.

British business, voluntary agencies and our research community have a vital contribution to make to the eradication of poverty. We have held discussions with all those sectors, which are keen to make a greater contribution. British business is increasingly clear that ethical business means good business in every sense and is keen to contribute to development. The aid and trade provision, which lacks poverty elimination as its central focus, will end. We are, however, keeping the option of providing mixed credits within agreed country programmes if they can contribute to the primary aim of reducing poverty. We shall consult the private sector when preparing country and other development strategies.

We shall also transform the Commonwealth Development Corporation into a public-private partnership that will increase the flow of private investment to the poorer countries. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced last month, we shall seek to enlarge the resources at the CDC's disposal by introducing private sector capital, with the Government retaining a substantial minority holding and a golden share. The CDC will act as an ethical and socially responsible investor in poorer countries, with the proceeds from the sale, I am glad to say, being ploughed back into the development programme.

The White Paper is not simply about aid. It covers the full range of Government policies affecting poorer countries. We shall ensure much greater consistency across the range of Government policies, including environment, trade, investment and agricultural policy. All will take account of our sustainable development objectives. We shall give particular attention to human rights, transparent and accountable government and core labour standards, building on the Government's ethical approach to international relations.

We shall use our influence to promote political stability and social cohesion and, wherever possible, to resolve conflict. I recently announced a doubling of my Department's resources for de-mining. I shall be signing for the United Kingdom the international convention on anti-personnel land mines in Ottawa next month.

We must also do more to reduce the external debt of developing countries. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer launched a new initiative at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' meeting in September. I have also set in place arrangements to write off aid debt owed to the UK by lower-income Commonwealth countries that are committed to pro-poor and transparent policies. We shall do all that we can to mobilise stronger international commitment to debt reduction.

The Government also attach great importance to increasing development awareness in Britain. Every child should be educated about development issues so that they can influence the shape of the world that they will inherit, and every adult should have the chance to influence the Government's policies. We shall establish a working group of educationists and others to improve development education. We also intend to establish an annual development policy forum representing the many strands of society with an interest in international development. We shall publish an annual report explaining how we shall secure the objectives described in the White Paper, and what progress has been made against the international development targets year on year. We shall also consult widely on the case for a new international development Act.

The resources that the international community has made available to support the development process have shamefully declined over recent years. The previous Administration almost halved Britain's development assistance as a proportion of gross national product. The Government will reverse the decline in UK spending on development assistance. We also reaffirm our commitment to the 0.7 per cent. UN target.

Every generation has a moral duty to reach out to the poor and needy, but the present generation carries an extra responsibility to ensure that the international development targets are met. If we do not, there is a real danger that by the middle of the next century the world will simply not be sustainable. Population pressures, environmental degradation, conflict and disease could impose catastrophic pressure on the planet.

The White Paper sets out how we can make progress. We should not overestimate what we can achieve alone, but we should not underestimate what we can achieve with others. The new British Government commit themselves in the White Paper to working for a major advance in poverty elimination and the building of a more just and sustainable future for all the people of the world.

Sir Alastair Goodlad (Eddisbury): I thank the Secretary of State for making her statement to the House, and for giving us good prior notice of it. I assure her, as I did earlier in the year, that international development is an issue in which both sides of the House take the deepest possible interest. Does she share my belief that an informed debate on this subject before too very long would be helpful, and that the Select Committee on International Development should examine her document thoroughly before we have a full debate?

Does the Secretary of State recollect that aid policy was reviewed only three years ago? Does she accept that the White Paper broadly reaffirms the priorities and policies that were set then? Does she recognise how very welcome is the Government's commitment to seek to halve the number of people living in absolute poverty by 2015, and does she acknowledge that the target was set by the previous Government? Does she accept that the adoption of the 2015 target—which, as she said, is an extremely ambitious but none the less realistic target—is a tribute to her predecessor, Lynda Chalker, whose achievements the House and many people throughout the world respect and the White Paper underlines?

Will the Secretary of State confirm that the White Paper reasserts the four key points for development set out in the Conservative Government's review of aid? They were that the purpose of aid is to promote sound political and economic policies; stronger health and education services; sustainable development; and co-operation with our international partners.

Does the Secretary of State acknowledge, as businesses do, that the aid and trade provision, which was introduced by a previous Labour Government, has provided important projects that have benefited developing countries as well as boosted British enterprise? Which of the criteria governing ATP cause her particular problems, and which of the projects approved since 1993 would she have cancelled?

For which countries will the mixed credits to which the Secretary of State referred be available, and in what amounts? Which in-country programmes will be increased to reflect the current and projected levels of ATP funding? Will the mixed credits in aggregate be more or less than the current ATP budget? Pending clarification of that, recipient countries and the business community will feel that—how shall I put it?—the Government emerge from this part of the White Paper with, at best, mixed credit.

I remind the Secretary of State that the House is still waiting for the details of the proposed public-private partnership for the CDC. Will she join me in paying tribute to the work done by the CDC? Does she agree that the longer the details for the new arrangements are kept secret, the more uncertainty it will bring to the CDC and those who want to work with it? Can she say how the new entity will be financed in terms of debt and equity, how much she expects to be the proceeds from the sale of the majority of the Government's interests, whether the sum would constitute a net increase in the aid budget and when the new entity will come into being?

Does the Secretary of State accept that tied aid has enabled British firms to benefit from British aid programmes over the years, as well as the recipient countries? Does she agree that any untied British aid must be given in conjunction with other donors, because unilateral untying, like universal disarmament, would ultimately be pointless?

The Secretary of State acknowledged the work done by the previous Government to reduce third-world debt. Will she confirm her support for the Jubilee 2000 initiative, and say what measures will be taken to ensure that debt relief is linked to good government and sound economic criteria? Will she say how much of the aid debt to which she referred, owed to the United Kingdom by lower-income Commonwealth countries committed to pro-poor and transparent policies—potentially up to £132 million—she is writing off, and tell us when that will happen? Will she also tell us how she sees the Government's role in the world's campaign against corruption in this context?

The Secretary of State mentioned the impact of population expansion on developing countries, but I do not think that I heard her commit the Government to continuing to support the family planning programme sponsored by her Department and by the United Nations. I am sure that the House would be grateful if she did so.

Does the Secretary of State wish to take the opportunity to endorse the OECD report that praised the quality of bilateral British aid? Can she tell us what measures the Government will take to ensure that that quality is maintained, and that there is proper oversight of multilateral donor organisations? In particular, what plans has she to improve the management of the European Union's environmental aid during the British presidency? Will she join me in paying tribute to the dedication of the civil servants and non-governmental organisation employees whose professionalism has contributed so much to the present high regard in which British aid is held?

I am sure that the Secretary of State shares the House's concern over today's news about the latest evacuation on Montserrat. Does she agree that the people of Montserrat desperately need the British Government's help to provide housing, safeguard health, build an airstrip and bring about a return to the self-sufficiency of which the island is proud? Does she agree that British dependent territories should have first call on British aid for all reasonable

[Sir Alastair Goodlad]

purposes? Is she aware that the previous Government used the contingency reserve to support Montserrat, and that the present Government should do the same?

The Government's support for the United Nations' 0.7 per cent. public aid target is not new; but will the Secretary of State undertake that it will now be met in the lifetime of the present Parliament? Will she confirm that there is a larger UN target of 1 per cent. of gross national product, which takes into account public and private money, and that in the last financial year the United Kingdom exceeded that target by more than a third? It was second to the Netherlands in GNP percentage terms as a donor of aid to the developing world. Will the Secretary of State commit the Government to continuing to exceed that larger target, and will she acknowledge that it is not the source of funding that matters, but its application? Will she tell the House whether she expects to increase the amount of money disbursed for bilateral aid?

Will the Secretary of State pay tribute to the private investors who are creating real jobs with real investment in the developing world? Will she confirm that the 2015 target for cutting poverty is accompanied by a target for achieving world free trade by 2020? As she has said, trade and prosperity are linked, and although she has readily signed up to the first date, will she now say that she supports the second?

Does the Secretary of State accept that she has inherited an internationally acclaimed aid programme, underpinned by a bipartisan determination to tackle development issues, and that our role in opposition will be to ensure that our targets are kept to and that that legacy is not squandered?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support for the White Paper. I agree that the Select Committee's announcement that it intends to scrutinise it is welcome to everyone, because we want the broadest possible agreement about how to take this matter forward.

The right hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that the targets were set by the previous Government. I have paid my tributes, and they were genuine, to Lynda Chalker, but the Conservative Government cut her aid programme and restricted many of the things that she wanted to do. The Conservatives make her a saint when she is no longer the Minister, which I am not sure she would appreciate. The targets were set by the UN conferences and drawn together in the OECD's development committee report. That is the beauty of them: they are already agreed internationally, so we can all co-operate in implementing them.

On the aid and trade provision, the best of British business agrees that business does not want subsidies to bring forward programmes which do not help development that eradicates poverty. The ATP took us into countries and into projects that were not the highest priority—it took us to Pergau. The right hon. Gentleman should be ashamed to bring that up. His Government put forward that programme, which was found to breach our law by the British courts. That is why we are getting rid of the ATP—it has not been effective in supporting poverty eradication and it brought Britain's development programme into disrepute.

There are no figures for future mixed credit. We have said that if the private sector can come in behind a country's strategies, bringing in investment that helps to benefit that country and to eradicate poverty, the leverage that can properly come out of the aid budget will be made available. The aim is not to distort priorities, as the ATP did, but to help development that helps the poor.

On the CDC, details will, of course, be brought to the House. The reforms require legislation, so there will be full scrutiny in the House. I have an idea of what the sale might raise, but I would not dream of putting that before the House now. However, we shall report fully and the House will have a full chance to scrutinise the proposals. The purpose is not only to keep the CDC as a development organisation—the Government stake and golden share will secure that—but to increase private sector flows into the CDC, so that there is more private sector investment in the poorest countries. There is no uncertainty in the CDC: it is absolutely delighted with the proposals and keen to take them forward, working closely with me and my Department.

There has been much misunderstanding about tied aid—the World Development Movement got itself in a muddle on that. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, traditionally, all programmes coming out of countries' aid budgets have involved firms in this country and the OECD has said that that sometimes leads to inefficiency. We in Britain are saying that our tied aid is down to 20 per cent. We want increasingly to source in developing countries, because that helps their international development, and we want multilateral untying because that increases efficiency. Unilateral untying would mean just that French, German or Dutch firms could come in to fill the gap, which would not benefit developing countries in any way.

We certainly admire the work—particularly that of the Churches—on the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which highlights the problem of debt, which is a barrier to development in some of the poorest countries. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced to the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' meeting, we are keen to do everything in our power—we have put in more resources and more effort—to speed up the implementation of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative. We want every country that is heavily indebted to be on track by 2000, which is in tune with the aspirations of the Jubilee 2000 campaign.

I cannot off the top of my head tell the right hon. Gentleman how much is already committed of the £132 million that I have made available for the cancellation of Commonwealth debt. We have already reached agreement with six or seven countries and talks are taking place with some others. I shall certainly let him have the information immediately.

On the right hon. Gentleman's point about corruption, there is no doubt that this is a time when we can make great advances. Corruption hurts the poor. Both developed and developing countries have been implicated, so the OECD is now calling for all countries to make the offering of a bribe to a public official in a foreign country a criminal offence and also to cease making bribes tax deductible—which they were in this country until two years ago. To his credit, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), stopped that. Britain has put its house in order, and every other country must also do so.

Together, we must bear down on corruption. At the annual meeting of the IMF and the World bank, there was a new statement on dealing with corruption. There is the possibility of a real advance. It is the poor whom corruption hurts and we must all do what we can to eliminate it.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to endorse the praise for British aid administration. Let there be no doubt that my Department is second to none. We have high-quality civil servants and the quality of the administration of our aid programme is admired internationally. It is sad that the programme was halved under the previous Administration—*[Interruption.]* It was; it was halved from 0.51 per cent. of gross national product to 0.27 per cent. It was halved in terms of the international target of 0.7 per cent. The Opposition know that and should not try to hide behind Jesuitical points.

My Department and I are working together to develop the White Paper and then to implement it. My officials are the best—and now they will be able to do their best with a Government who are committed to their endeavours, instead of holding them back from what they can achieve.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to say that one of our targets for our presidency of the European Union—apart from getting the mandate for the Lomé renegotiation right and incorporating the international development targets in that—will be to improve the quality of the EU performance. It could be much better. A great deal of our spend goes that way, so we must improve its performance.

The news on Montserrat is bad indeed. The volcano is erupting and, even worse, the levels of ash are very serious. There is great worry about the health and safety of the people on the island. Conservative Members should be careful not to think of this as a cheap party political issue, as most of the present arrangements were put in place under the previous Administration. It is an enormously difficult emergency because the behaviour of the volcano has kept changing.

I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman about housing on Montserrat. In fact, 50 of the houses that I authorised in July are now ready. Unfortunately, they are not occupied because of the strike by electricity workers on the island, which is not helpful. My view is that some of the larger projects must be pulled together into a sustainable development plan. I am under pressure to build an expensive prison on Montserrat. I really think that that should come later. First, we should make people safe and see how many of them want to stay on the island; the prison can wait. Some people think that big projects are the answer, when in fact current services for some people are just not good enough. It is a serious difficulty.

The right hon. Gentleman called for an increase in our aid contribution, which was a great cheek. He then rightly said that public and private investment was needed, but at the moment private flows go only to the 10 most developed of the developing countries. If we rely only on that, the poorest countries will never take off. That is why we need overseas development assistance as an investment in the take-off of those countries' human development and the sort of economic arrangements that will enable them to create economic growth that will benefit the poor.

The right hon. Gentleman's last point was that he wanted efforts to be bipartisan. I welcome that. As I have said to him before, this is the most noble and most pressing imperative for humanity. Not only is it morally pressing, but the world will be unsafe in 25 to 30 years' time for everyone, no matter how privileged now, unless we make progress. I hope that both sides of the House will unite in seeking to do that.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I am glad to be the first Labour Member to welcome warmly my right hon. Friend's White Paper. Does it not paint a significant contrast between this Government and the previous Government? Whereas we did not see such a White Paper in the 18 years of the previous Administration, it has taken this Government only six months to produce one. Will she comment further on her plans for women? I know that she is particularly interested in that aspect of the issue. Women in impoverished countries often suffer doubly, because they are oppressed by political and cultural outlooks that make a poor life even worse for them. I look forward to hearing her plans.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her remarks. She is absolutely right. The fact is that 70 per cent. of the world's poor are women and children, and that we cannot make progress without strengthening women's position. It is now absolutely proven that educating girls is transformatory. In the poorest countries, however, girls are excluded from education. We will not succeed in development unless we achieve as a priority the objective of universal primary education. Strengthening the position and confidence of women who care for children, and increasing their access to credit, so that they can increase family income will also be absolutely key to making progress.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Like the rest of the House, I welcome the White Paper, which is being produced after 20 years. I welcome also the emphasis that the White Paper—after much consultation, on which I congratulate the Government—places on my chief concerns: primary education, health and welfare of women, and women's access to health and family planning services. I suspect, however, that the White Paper is strong on words and weak on action. I am very worried by the number of times that the word "encouraged" is used and by how little commitment there is to establishing processes to put proposals into practice.

The White Paper announces that there will be a welcome end to the aid and trade provision, which achieved such notoriety under the previous Government. So far, however, the signs have not been encouraging. The Government's ethical foreign policy sits uncomfortably with arms contracts recently negotiated with Indonesia. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ask a question."] Surely we should be leading the world in reducing tied aid. I was disturbed to note that, in Montserrat, aid was being used to employ a British contractor.

Madam Speaker: Order. I must call the hon. Lady to order. She is not required now to make all the comments that she is making. Back Benchers, too, are not required now to make comments. The exchange between Front Benchers took 30 minutes. As many hon. Members would like to ask a question, I will have to have brisk questions to the Minister if they are to be called. I know that the

[Madam Speaker]

Minister will respond with brisk answers, because she is very articulate. I expect the rest of the House to be likewise.

Dr. Tonge: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker; I misunderstood the purpose of the statement.

I should like to say—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ask a question."] This is a question. I have every confidence in the Secretary of State—if she is able—and in her Department to deliver the aims of the White Paper. I warn her, however, that the road to hell is paved with good questions. Does she carry the rest of the Government—the Department of Trade and Industry, the Treasury and all other Departments—with her, or not?

Clare Short: The hon. Lady is a new hon. Member, and we will therefore have to be a little patient. I know, however, that her intentions are good. I forgot to reply to the right hon. Member for Eddisbury (Sir A. Goodlad) on family planning, but she has also raised the issue. Almost half the people in the world do not have access to family planning, which is a grave breach of their rights and ability to raise healthy and educated children. Our commitment to universal basic health care includes a commitment to reproductive health care and to an expansion in provision for everyone in the world, so that people can make their own decisions about their own family size.

I should explain to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) that a White Paper is an analysis and a statement of permanent Government intent. We are currently engaged in the process of adjusting all our staffing and budgeting, and big amounts of money are moving around within my portfolio. A White Paper is meant to be a long-lasting statement of policy purpose. Implementation follows, and she will see it.

I hope that the Select Committee on International Development will examine the tied aid issue. There is so much muddle in the debate; it would be helpful if everyone—including the World Development Movement—learned the meaning and particulars of tied aid and how best to make progress. The hon. Lady was misinformed on that matter, also.

White Papers are Government White Papers. If the hon. Lady thinks that a White Paper can be published without the support of the Treasury and that the aid and trade provision can be got rid of without the support of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Prime Minister, she does not understand how Government works. This White Paper commits every Government Department. We are united in that commitment and we shall ensure that it is implemented across all our policies.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The House will welcome the Secretary of State's noble imperative of attacking world trade—[HON. MEMBERS: "World poverty."] I am sorry—I am confusing my concepts. I have not read the White Paper, but will she confirm that on the back of trade we can expect a rise in living and labour standards in third-world countries? While the International Labour Organisation is an appropriate forum for that, will she confirm that there is a role for the World Trade Organisation to help build labour and social standards in developing countries on the back of trade?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He will know that the projections of increased wealth in the world from globalisation are very large indeed, but if the process is not well managed, there is a risk that it will marginalise some countries and cause growing inequality within countries. That is why we need support for core labour standards and a strengthening of the ILO.

There are interesting arguments about whether there should be some minimum human rights conditions in the WTO. That argument will continue, but most developing countries are opposed to the idea. Therefore, the way to make progress is through the ILO. We are strengthening our commitment to its work, to core labour standards for everyone and, especially, to the eradication of hazardous child labour.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): Will the Secretary of State accept my congratulations to the Government on their attempts so far to maintain the lead in international forums such as the G7 and others on third-world debt relief, a lead which was first established by Lord Lawson and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the previous Prime Minister?

The Secretary of State pleased and surprised me by referring with approval to the approach of Michel Camdessus of the International Monetary Fund. Does that mean not only that she is approaching new Labour, but that she is committed to conditionality in debt relief and that debt relief should be tied to compliance with well-judged IMF programmes? Does she accept, as old Labour did not always do, that debt relief with those conditions is the right way forward, because it ties debt relief to good economic policies that deliver sustainable development and does not simply restore credit worthiness to regimes that might squander precious moneys?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. In fact, Britain's lead on debt relief started under a previous Labour Government, but I have paid full tribute to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's contribution and to that of his Government. However, he will know that some countries say that Britain keeps taking the high ground but not producing too much money. I am sure that he is familiar with the idea that many countries thought that his initiatives were of that kind—good on analysis but short on resources. I pay genuine tribute to the leadership that Britain has given under the previous Government, under the previous Labour Government and now under this Government, with the Chancellor's efforts on debt relief. However, we must do more.

I have enormous regard for Mr. Camdessus. I recommend anyone who worries about the IMF's track record—people were entitled to do so in parts of the 1980s—to read his speech at the last annual meeting, in which he made a commitment to high-quality growth. That is growth which reduces poverty, promotes equality, sustains the environment and respects people's traditions. Earlier, when the IMF imposed conditions that required some of the poorest countries to charge for basic education and health care, it went too far. Mr. Camdessus is much better, and the IMF is healthier in his hands.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman that there has to be conditionality for debt cancellation. If Mr. Mobutu were still in power, I would not be in favour of cancelling his debt. Debt cancellation has to support Governments who want to deliver to the poor. It is because debt hurts the poor that we have to take action. We want to get behind the right kind of conditionality which supports good Governments who encourage human development and the type of economic growth that is sustainable and which helps the poor.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on establishing so quickly the principles according to which she will work in her new Department. I congratulate her especially on the focus on poverty and on women—we all know that investment in women is very good investment.

As the person who brought the scandal surrounding the Pergau dam to the House's attention in the first place, may I ask my right hon. Friend to confirm again that there will be no link between aid and arms in her Department, unlike under the previous Government who linked the two rather too often in the cases of Malaysia and Indonesia?

I am glad that we are aiming to spend 0.7 per cent. of gross national product on aid. Does my right hon. Friend have any idea of the time scale in which that might be achieved? We have had that aim many times in the past, but it is important to establish the time scale.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I pay my respects to her work on exposing the Pergau scandal. Of course there will be no repeat of Pergau, because what happened was illegal. The previous Government were hauled through the courts for breaching their own laws. There will be no link between aid and arms sales under this Administration. It was illegal under the previous Administration.

The aid and trade provision has gone because it distorted the use of aid funds and took them to countries and projects that were not a priority. We are very keen on the availability of credit to attract inward investment that will promote development, but such credit must satisfy proper tests.

Many hon. Members have not thought through the logic of our commitment to reverse the decline in our aid spend. Because the target is a percentage of GNP, considerable year-on-year increases are needed to reverse the decline. How fast we reach 0.7 per cent. depends on economic growth. To keep our promise, we have to make substantial year-on-year increases. That commitment has been upheld by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. The previous Labour Government went steadily up to 0.51 per cent. Labour's record is good.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): That is because GDP went down under Labour.

Clare Short: No, it did not. Sadly, the figure came down to 0.27 per cent. under the previous Administration. We shall reverse that and reinstate our proud record.

Mr. Wells: The Select Committee on International Development looks forward to welcoming the right hon. Lady next Thursday for a long discussion on such matters. As she knows, I object strongly to the ATP and have always opposed it. I am delighted that she has ended it. Will she join me in a campaign against countries that subsidise their exports and get work that would otherwise come to this country? It would be a disaster if she did not join me in a campaign—and, indeed, lead the campaign with the enthusiasm that only she can provide—to get Germany, France and Japan, the three countries which are also difficult on debt issues, to abandon ATP with her, so that jobs for our people are not put in jeopardy.

Are the mixed credits that the right hon. Lady is proposing expected to take the place of ATP? Will she assure the House that any money saved on ATP will not be taken away from the aid budget?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I very much welcome the Select Committee inquiry. I want our commitments to be deeply shared across the country to strengthen any Government's endeavours. The work of the Select Committee will help us with that and I look forward to giving evidence.

I share the hon. Gentleman's objective of preventing other countries from misusing their aid budget. That is why it is right for us not to untie our remaining tied aid unilaterally. Wherever possible, we shall source in developing countries, but then use our willingness and the OECD campaign, which has given a good lead, to get multilateral untying so that dubious motives are removed from everybody's aid programme. If we untied unilaterally, French and German companies would be able to come into our aid programme, which would be a nonsensical way to make progress. I repeat the commitment in the White Paper to do everything that we can to ensure multilateral untying and to use our influence in any way that we can.

There is no question of the money that went into aid and trade being taken away from the aid programme. It will be redirected to the objectives that we have outlined today.

While I look forward to discussing it with the Select Committee, I am certain that under the conditions laid down in the White Paper, there is no risk that mixed credits could be abused. If we can help in developing countries by, say, paying for feasibility studies or initial costs to draw a large-scale investment into, for example, rural transport where the poor cannot get their produce to market, it will be a proper use of the aid budget. The OECD, however, has a test. It must be proved that such assisted projects could not have worked commercially. It has been tightening up on that. I agree with the hon. Gentleman's objectives and will happily work with him on them.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): May I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend and our Government on the publication of the White Paper and the setting of measurable targets on which an annual report will be given to the House? May I especially welcome the moves to ensure that all pupils learn more about development issues so that they will be better able than many of their parents to understand the importance of such issues in a shrinking world?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The beauty of the targets is that they are internationally agreed. If we could get the international system to work

[Clare Short]

towards them, and measure progress in country after country, year on year, we could move the international system forward and be clear about when we are succeeding and when we are failing. We could achieve considerable progress. Our commitment is to report to Parliament every year against those targets and to encourage everyone else to do so.

I agree about young people, in our country and world wide. If we do not make progress, the dangerous future will be their adulthood. If we do not make progress on poverty elimination, when today's little children are my age, they will be living with catastrophe. We owe it to them to ensure that they understand what is going on in the world and how to make progress. We are committed to driving that forward, and to considering how we can bring better materials into the national curriculum and teacher training so that we will have a generation that can take command of its future and understand how important all this is for them.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid–Kent): I wish to make two small points. First, does the right hon. Lady agree that in all the talk about Government-to-Government conversation, development is increasingly seen as responding to the needs expressed by the poor themselves? That is fundamental.

Secondly, I have not yet seen the White Paper, but I hope that it deals with the fact that of the poorest of the poor, the 5 or 6 per cent. who are disabled are unquestionably at most disadvantage. Will the Secretary of State give a commitment not to forget them?

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The point about Government-to-Government conversation, where we can get it and where we are dealing with good Governments committed to poverty eradication, is that we can work with a country that wants to introduce universal primary education by giving support for teacher training, books and administrative systems. We could perhaps help finance departments to get rid of wasteful spending and redirect money and so create sustainable, long-term universal services. That is the best way to work, but it works only if the people of the country involved know the plans, own them and are able to participate and push their Government forward. We get success in countries that are committed, and where public opinion understands the commitment and pushes the Government to make greater progress.

The hon. Gentleman is right. Poverty makes people ill, and sickness makes people poorer. That is the tragedy of people without health care who live with dirty, polluted water and who are constantly sick. They and the disabled become poorer and poorer. Giving them the chance to have a decent livelihood is key to eradicating poverty. Without that, people with sickness and disability will remain on the margins of human existence and we will not achieve what we must achieve. I give him that assurance.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): My right hon. Friend said rightly in her statement that conflict was a catastrophe for the planet. In those circumstances, is there in her Department a paper on the effects of sanctions, which have devastating results for the poorest people and often no results at all for the leadership of the country against whom sanctions are imposed? Will she reflect on the effect of sanctions?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. The world history of conflicts since the end of the cold war reveals that they have been concentrated in poor countries. They are caused by poverty, and those conflicts, in turn, create poverty and instability, which affect civilians and create refugees. As a key to development, we must prevent that and build people's life possibilities instead of their descending into war.

As my hon. Friend knows, and as I have said to him before, I am keen that we should do what we can to refine the sanctions instrument so that its hits the elites more. My Department is doing work on that; it is difficult, but there is room for more progress. I hope that we can take that work forward, and I expect him to continue to prod me about it.

Sir David Madel (South–West Bedfordshire): Is the right hon. Lady aware that the former Prime Minister of Israel, Shimon Peres, is constantly warning that a poor middle east is a very dangerous middle east? With that statement in mind, when the Government assume the presidency of the European Union, will they step up efforts with our partners to get clean proper water supplies to Gaza and the west bank? Without the lifting of living standards from the bare minimum in those two areas, the agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation simply will not stick.

Clare Short: I share the hon. Gentleman's concern. We are all desperately worried about the middle east peace process which is not going forward as rapidly as we would wish. He will be aware that we have considerable programmes in Gaza and on the west bank, but the constant closure of the borders and people's inability to work are reducing income levels and creating yet more poverty and desperation there. I can give the hon. Gentleman our commitment to continue to work on the west bank and in Gaza and, as a Government, to do everything we can, particularly during our EU presidency, to bolster the peace process.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I positively welcome my right hon. Friend's White Paper? As she will know, over the years, the British Government have sponsored many projects which are not good. They have not been properly evaluated by outside contractors or, indeed, by departmental people when they have been required to do so. Will she re-examine project evaluation arrangements within her Department?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend who has so noisily defended ATP—there may have been a little movement on it which I welcome greatly.

In the past, there has been an obsession with inputs in development and not enough evaluation. We need high inputs, but we also need to evaluate what succeeds. We should not just squabble about inputs. ATP distorted projects, but that does not mean that every ATP project was bad; merely that many were not as good as they should have been.

I absolutely guarantee to my hon. Friend that we have introduced arrangements for strong evaluation. We are getting rid of ATP and, in future, any collaboration with

the private sector to increase inward investment will be evaluated. The British private sector wants an ethical reputation at home and abroad. If we succeed in development, we shall be looking at the big markets of the future. British firms want to be known for doing good-quality business. They do not want a cheap subsidy for a second-rate project. I guarantee to my hon. Friend that evaluation is about quality projects.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Will the right hon. Lady tell us something about the dog that did not bark in her statement—the question of tariff barriers and non-tariff barriers? Does she agree that one of the major contributors to improving the lot of poor people in poor countries is to remove those tariff barriers and non-tariff barriers? Can she explain why she did not mention that?

Clare Short: I invite the hon. Gentleman to read the White Paper. I would have loved to stand here and read the whole thing to him, but I do not think that you would have permitted that, Madam Speaker.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right that tariff barriers are important. It is important that the least-developed countries get good access to developed markets and can take up that access. We have firm, detailed commitments to achieve that. I believe that, if we get it right, the private sector will want to invest in some of those countries so that access to the EU market is gained. That will bring development to the poorest. That is the approach which we want to adopt, and I promise the hon. Gentleman that there is a significant section in the White Paper on that matter.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the cancellation of debt that was supposed to aid third-world countries in the course of the past 18 years under the three Chancellors of the Exchequer who have already been mentioned was not all that it was cracked up to be? It is significant that, during that period, about £5 billion was written off as irrecoverable debts that benefited the four top clearing banks—Barclays, Lloyds, Midland and National Westminster, all of which now have Tory Members of Parliament or ex-Members of Parliament on the board. Will she give an assurance that, under the new regime, if any money is to be written off, it should be the debt of poor third-world countries?

Clare Short: I defer to my hon. Friend's knowledge of the banking sector, which surprises many people. I would not dream of challenging his detailed grasp of these matters. The big debt write-off that is needed now is debt to the International Monetary Fund and the World bank, which would ease public sector and government debt around the world. I assure my hon. Friend that there will be no rip off of the aid programme in any way whatsoever; it will be used to promote development for the poorest and nothing else.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Not only will the House welcome the statement, but many outside the House will welcome it. The Secretary of State referred to education and, as the recipient of many letters from children pressing these issues, I understand the role that that plays in Northern Ireland.

I want to press two questions. First, is there a staged augmentation to reach the target, because that is where we have gone wrong all along? The Government have failed, but one has to admit that the voluntary organisations, and especially the Churches, feel that their world development appeal has also failed to reach its target.

Secondly, when there is an attempt to increase the capital of the Commonwealth Development Corporation by private investment, may I take it that that is not intended to be a loophole so that private investors invest money in the CDC when they might previously have given it to the voluntary agencies that do so much good work?

Clare Short: I know that the hon. Gentleman receives many letters; I receive letters from him enclosing some of those letters. I agree that these matters inspire deep feelings across the country, and I admire our people for having those concerns.

The hon. Gentleman says that we have not worked strongly enough on targets before. The paradox is that, world wide, more people have escaped from poverty in the past 50 years than in the previous 500 years of human history. We have made great progress: fewer children die, people live longer and more people are literate, but population growth is very fast and there are, therefore, even more people living in great poverty. The beauty of the current position is that we know what would succeed, if only we applied it more effectively and more broadly.

We now have targets agreed by the whole international community and if we can get the Commonwealth, the United Nations, the European Union, all the donor countries, the World bank and so on to work towards those targets, we will be able to measure progress and make significant progress. That is the opportunity presented by these times. I hope that we can all get behind that commitment and that Britain can make a contribution towards leading it.

On the CDC, the hon. Gentleman should be absolutely assured that there will be no loophole whatsoever. The CDC will remain a development organisation; it will make a stronger commitment to ethical principles and the Government will retain a big stake and a golden share so as to hold it to those objectives. That is what the organisation wants, but it will now be able to raise money from other sources. British pension funds—the growing ethical pension fund movement—and some of the Churches might want to take a share in what will be a big, leading ethical investment organisation which will help to lever investment into the countries that currently do not receive it.

There is no danger. Most investors will not be investing the cash that they give to charity, and I hope that people will continue to do both. I hope that people who are concerned about development will press their pension funds to invest in bodies such as the CDC, or think of buying a stake themselves, while continuing to make charitable contributions as well.

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, especially her reference to the link between human rights and aid and debt relief. An early test of our commitment to that link will be our attitude towards Jamaica, Belize, Trinidad and the other

[Mr. Chris Mullin]

Caribbean countries that display an atrocious disregard for human rights and are in the process of reneging on their international obligations. Does she have any plans in that respect?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is important to spell out the fact that human rights include political rights, the right to education, and social and economic rights. A commitment to human rights unites the north and the south of the world. I would add that we are also talking about the right to free expression, the right to a job and the right to a decent life—we want to reinforce them all.

I have arranged for talks with Jamaica and Belize on whether they will qualify for the initiative on Commonwealth debt that I have announced. If my hon. Friend would like to talk to me some more about his concerns, I shall make sure they are taken into account in that process.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I join in the chorus of welcome for the White Paper, but is my right hon. Friend aware that it will also be welcomed by many people around the world? She referred to third-world Governments, but she might care to make a distinction between what authoritarian Governments say about some of the linkages she has mentioned and what the people in their countries—the workers, the Churches and the organisations—have to say about them.

I invite my right hon. Friend to consider the idea of incentives and rewards—of linking access to trade to good behaviour in the areas of human rights, environmental and labour standards. Finally, I invite her to set an example herself by serving in her Ministry coffee supplied by Café Direct; and to have a word with her parliamentary private secretary, the Chairman of the Commons Catering Committee. Early-day motion 362 invites him to ensure that coffee and tea produced under fair trade conditions are served in the palace of Westminster. That will put into effect action, not words.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree that trade is very important. We want to back good Governments who are struggling to make progress much more, so that they succeed and so that people who live under bad Governments are given hope and are offered examples of good Governments elsewhere. We need to establish solidarity with the people who live under bad Governments by, for instance, working with NGOs.

We are negotiating in the European Union on the general system of preferences to produce the sort of positive incentive system that my hon. Friend has described—greater preference for protecting environmental and core labour standards. Many people think that the World Trade Organisation should move in that direction, but that will not be achieved in the short term because so many Governments oppose it. That is why we need to make progress through the ILO and the general system of preferences.

As for coffee, I have told everyone what a fine Department I have. We already serve fair trade coffee there; my PPS has been discussing the matter and he may have an announcement to make before too long.

I am glad that the British people are becoming ethical consumers, forcefully telling supermarkets and shops that they want guarantees that their produce has not been made using child labour and is the result of decent labour standards for those who produced it. I hope that such practices will spread throughout the country, and that firm after firm and local authority after local authority will commit themselves to buying ethically sourced goods. Of course, the British people want good produce, but they want to know that the labour overseas used to make it was properly paid and treated.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We must now move on.

Points of Order

4.32 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It relates directly to my constituency and is of enormous concern to the people of Devon and Cornwall.

Yesterday, the Ministry of Defence announced that the refit contract for HMS Argyll would go to Rosyth dockyard in Scotland instead of to Devonport dockyard in Devon. That decision is contrary to expectations and is causing widespread concern. Are you, Madam Speaker, able to require the Secretary of State for Defence to come to the House to explain this bizarre decision and to reassure me that it was made for sound commercial reasons and not just because he had come under party political pressure from heavyweight Labour Scottish Members?

Madam Speaker: The hon. Gentleman knows that I can deal only with procedural matters, not with matters of Government policy. I cannot bring a Minister to the Dispatch Box to give the reasons that the hon. Gentleman requires, but he is wise enough to know that there are other methods—Adjournment debates, parliamentary questions, and so on—by which to raise the matter and to try to elicit some further information.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Will you draw attention to the need for Members to be a little briefer in questioning Ministers during statements and perhaps even private notice questions? What we saw today was almost an abuse of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) tells me that 48 questions were asked.

Madam Speaker: I did not count the number of questions, but I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. I have noticed in recent times that questions on a statement, not only from Opposition Front-Bench Members but from Back Benchers, are very long indeed. I sit here and listen to hon. Members making great comments about statements without coming to any point of view or asking a question. The House seems to be moving away from asking questions; hon. Members are too concerned with commenting on the statement that has already been made.

I have noted the hon. Gentleman's point. I noticed that the questioning from the Opposition took longer than the statement. I always keep a record of how long it takes to make a statement and how long it takes to reply to it.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(4) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the Social Security (Lone Parents)(Amendment) Regulations 1997 (S.I., 1997, No. 1790) be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

Question agreed to.

War Widows and Pensioners (Equal Treatment)

4.35 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to end the differential treatment of war widows and war disablement pensioners by local authorities; and for connected purposes.

The Bill will require local authorities to disregard totally war disability pensions and war widows' pensions when making assessments for housing benefit and levels of council tax benefit. It follows earlier initiatives in previous Parliaments by a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who is in his place today.

In Northern Ireland, where the Government are effectively the housing and rating authority, there is a total disregard. That is to the credit of Her Majesty's Government. Hon. Members who represent Scottish constituencies can take justifiable pride in the knowledge that every local authority in Scotland exercises in full its right to disregard war widows' pensions and war disability pensions when assessing for housing benefit or council tax benefit.

The overwhelming majority of local authorities in England and Wales now also exercise in full their discretion to disregard those pensions when making such assessments. That follows an effective campaign by the Royal British Legion, which reduced the number of local authorities refusing totally to disregard those pensions from 40 per cent. to some 45 or 46 councils, which remain resolute in the view that they should take the pensions into account.

I was interested to see today that Ian Townsend, the Secretary-General of the Royal British Legion, described it as "iniquitous" that some 6,000 pensioners out of 300,000 are disadvantaged in that way. It is clearly unfair and anomalous, and the House needs to remedy the problem.

A war pensioner can lose up to one fifth of his or her pension if he or she receives council tax benefit, and as much as 72p in the pound if he or she also receives housing benefit. A pensioner deafened by artillery fire in the second world war, for example, might receive benefit of £50.55 from the Department for Social Security in recognition of that disability, but he will lose £32.44 in reduced council benefits and keep just £18.11 to compensate for his deafness if his council refuses to disregard the pension that he receives for his war service and his disability. In effect, it is a local tax on war pensions, sometimes at nearly twice the highest rate of income tax paid by the richest in the land—in excess of 40 per cent.

You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that characteristically I speak en message. In the course of my research, I was pleased to see that for its November/December 1995 issue *Saga Magazine* approached the Labour party for an official statement, and that Labour party headquarters stated in respect of the matter:

"It is a cop-out on the Government's part. It should legislate to say that war pensions are either counted or ignored, and not give councils the discretion. Obviously, we would like war pensions to be ignored."

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) for taking the trouble to come to the Treasury Bench this afternoon. He will recall the following words:

"The Labour party recognises the unfairness of the current situation, although you will understand that many decisions about what improvements might be made to the current social security system may have to wait until we are in government."

Those are the words that many of us, as candidates in the last election, were commended to include in our letters in response to the important representations made to us by veterans organisation about the issue.

We are now in government. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister pointed out, we have not been in government very long, and we cannot wave a magic wand to put right all the wrongs. Nevertheless, my ten-minute Bill provides a legislative opportunity to try to remedy the unfairness. I hope that I will have the Government's support in this attempt.

It is clearly unfair to the pensioners that there is not parity of treatment throughout the United Kingdom, and that they might have the misfortune of living in one of the local authorities which, unlike those in Scotland and the vast majority in England and Wales, do not recognise that war pensioners and war widows are special. I want us to act now so that not just 95 per cent. of local authorities in the UK disregard the pensions, but 100 per cent.

I will not list the 46 local authorities that are failing their pensioners. That would be invidious and would take too long. I ask hon. Members to make representations to their local authorities to ascertain whether their authorities are in that category. Hon. Members who represent areas whose councils do give a total disregard might share my indignation. It is unfair not only to the pensioners, but to the council tax payers in those areas, as they are meeting their full moral obligation.

I hope that the House will support me and give me leave to bring in the Bill. There is unlikely to be any hon. Member who objects to it. I do not want hon. Members merely to acquiesce in the matter by their silence. That would allow some local authorities to continue to act unfairly. We must be proactive.

We—especially my hon. Friends—must impress on Ministers on the Treasury Bench that even if my Bill cannot become law, they should take the principle on board at an early legislative opportunity. The Government already do so in Northern Ireland as the Province's housing authority and the rating authority. Failure to disregard war pensions is clearly anomalous and grossly unfair to pensioners and to those good local authorities that have adopted the recommendations of the Royal British Legion and others, who recognise that war widows and people receiving war disability pensions are a very special category.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Andrew Mackinlay, Mr. Simon Hughes, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. John Austin, Mr. David Tredinnick, Mr. David Winnick, Dan Norris, Mr. John Burnett, Mr. John Cryer and Mr. Ivan Henderson.

WAR WIDOWS AND PENSIONERS (EQUAL TREATMENT)

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay accordingly presented a Bill to end the differential treatment of war widows and war disablement pensioners by local authorities; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 28 November, and to be printed [Bill 77].

Orders of the Day

Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill
[Lords]

Order for Second Reading read.

4.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill makes small changes to existing laws for certain minor offences. Although a modest piece of legislation, it is none the less significant in its potential to remove unnecessary burdens from many of those working in magistrates courts, the police and probation officers, affecting about half a million cases per year. It will also lead to reductions in delay in the magistrates courts—a key Labour manifesto commitment. Its main element was suggested by an efficiency scrutiny commissioned in 1994 to examine administrative burdens in the criminal justice system.

It may be helpful if I mention the current procedures that will be affected by the Bill. At present, the Magistrates Courts Act 1980 allows defendants on certain charges to return a plea of guilty by post. A significant proportion of such pleas are for summary traffic offences, such as exceeding speed limits. Offenders who are ready to admit their guilt and accept the penalty determined by the court for their particular offence can do so quickly and efficiently by post, saving both their own time and that of the courts. On average, some 38 per cent. of those summoned by post return guilty pleas by post.

However, about 35 per cent. of defendants simply do not respond to the summons at all. Some clearly will not respond for quite legitimate reasons, and the law has full and satisfactory remedies available to them. However, the plain truth is that a great many defendants simply ignore a summons as a means of delaying their personal responsibility in the judicial process. When a summons receives no response, the court must almost inevitably adjourn the case in order to decide whether there is any point in proceeding with the charge or to try further steps to get the defendant to court. Courts must be capable of hearing cases in the absence of the unco-operative defendant as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Under current legislation, a summons will usually include what is known as a "statement of facts"—in essence, that is a very short summary of the details of the case as recorded by the police. This information is sufficient for a defendant to acknowledge his or her guilt by post. However, if a defendant pleads not guilty or enters no plea and simply fails to respond, the Crown Prosecution Service must take the prosecution forward, for which the statement of facts is no longer sufficient.

That is why the efficiency scrutiny that I mentioned earlier suggested that the police should prepare a witness statement, as specified by section 9 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, and serve it with each summons. That would ensure that admissible statements were available to the court at the first scheduled hearing, whether or not the defendant responded. Clause 1 of the Bill establishes this. It permits a plea of guilty by post where either statements of fact or section 9 witness statements have been served with the summons. When a statement of facts is served with the summons, the procedure for a guilty plea will be exactly the same as at present. When a section 9 statement is served instead, it may be used as a summary of the facts, for a guilty by post plea, or to prove the case if no response is received to the summons.

The Bill provides two further refinements to procedures for minor summary motoring offences. At present, when a defendant is convicted of a summary offence under the traffic Acts, previous endorsements on his or her driving licence may be taken into consideration by the court when sentencing. However, if an offender has not produced his or her driving licence to the court, previous endorsements on it cannot be considered until the court has served notice on the defendant of its intention to cite previous convictions by using a print-out of the driver's record from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency.

Courts can request the print-out when issuing a summons so that it is available in court at the time of sentencing. However, once again, unco-operative defendants delay proceedings, since the court is obliged to adjourn after conviction and then notify the offender of its intentions, causing significant delay. The only way in which the court can proceed at the same hearing to convict and pass sentence is by ignoring any previous endorsements. That is a manifestly unreasonable situation which clause 2 of the Bill will remedy. It allows for the DVLA print-outs to be used by the court to prove any previous summary convictions, but removes the requirement to serve notice of that fact on the convicted defendant.

Clause 3 of the Bill removes one further snag in dealing with summary road traffic offences. Although courts can disqualify a defendant in his or her absence, they may wish the defendant to attend court to hear in person the reasons for disqualification. With minor motoring offences, cases are increasingly decided on the basis of written statements served on the defendant prior to trial. They are generally admissible in court as if they were oral evidence, but they do not satisfy the specific current statutory requirement for information to be substantiated on oath in order to issue a warrant. The clause allows the court to issue a warrant for a disqualification hearing without the need to substantiate the information on oath. The clause was proposed by a number of senior criminal justice practitioners and will serve to rectify a situation that makes no sense in the current process.

The remaining two clauses of the Bill are simply administrative, updating a number of references in related legislation and allowing implementation of the Bill to be delayed until the necessary changes to court and police documentation can be effected.

To test the efficiency of the proposals compared with the existing procedures, after the efficiency scrutiny had reported, a pilot project was conducted in Gloucestershire and Lancashire, from September 1996 to the end of March 1997. The outcomes were remarkably successful for all agencies involved. Up to 77 per cent. of "Bill procedure" cases were concluded—proved and sentenced—at a first court hearing, compared with 23 per cent. using the existing procedures. Some 86 per cent. of cases were proved at that first hearing. Adjournments were dramatically reduced—the average number of hearings dropped from 4.67 to 1.35 in Gloucestershire, and from 3.15 to 1.22 in Lancashire.

[Mr. Geoffrey Hoon]

Reductions in the average time taken from date of offence to the conclusion of the case were also significant—from 144 to 95 days in Gloucestershire, and from 139 to 84 in Lancashire. It is also interesting that prosecutions for minor road traffic cases rose by more than a third in Gloucestershire and Lancashire during the pilot period. Not surprisingly, all the criminal justice agencies involved in the pilot have indicated their clear support for the proposals set out in the Bill, which free valuable resources by reducing a very considerable proportion of the routine administrative burdens borne by all in processing minor motoring offences.

These savings are generally not realisable in cash terms. They represent an estimate of the resources released for use on other work, by expediting the processes in these minor motoring cases, but they are every bit as valuable to the criminal justice system as additional funds would be. I think that these results speak for themselves.

The Bill has passed all stages in the other place unopposed. I hope that the House will be able to give these modest but useful measures the same support and favour as they received there.

I commend the Bill to the House.

4.51 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): In another place, the entire proceedings of the Bill took 52 minutes—Second Reading lasted 40 minutes, Committee stage took seven minutes, and Third Reading five minutes. During the brief Second Reading debate, Lord Mishcon said:

"short Bills, however meritorious, deserve short speeches."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 July 1997; Vol. 581, c. 1523.]

I agree, at least on this occasion, and intend not to delay the House unduly.

It is worth noting, however, that the Bill's Second Reading in another place was but the overture—a quiet and well-ordered one—to the Second Reading of the Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill. For us, however, the business managers have prepared something different to follow—the Fossil Fuel Levy Bill. Who said that life in the Lords was dull and that explosive debates happen only in the Commons?

It is also, perhaps, worth noting that this is the third time that the Minister and I have squared up against each other since we took up our respective posts. The first was in Committee upstairs. The second was last Wednesday, when the hon. Gentleman's instructions were clearly to trot, not gallop, but in all circumstances to ensure that he took 45 minutes to complete a 10-minute course. I congratulate him on his obedience and on his ability, for the third time, to come before us with an order, announcement or Bill that is the product of the Conservative Government and Conservative policy.

As Lord Kingsland made clear, and as the Lord Chancellor candidly admitted, the Bill is the product of the efficiency scrutiny survey initiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) when he was Prime Minister. As Lord Kingsland said in another place, it is

"a sad fact that in the magistrates' courts nowadays it often takes almost as long to bring a guilty plea to court as it does to bring a not guilty plea to court."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 24 July 1997; Vol. 581, c. 1520.]

The Bill will go some way to correct that.

The Opposition welcome what is, after all, our own Bill, and we trust that magistrates throughout the country will do so as well. It is, after all, lay magistrates who deal with the overwhelming majority of criminal cases, including motoring cases, that come before our courts. Anything that we can do to ease their burden without adversely affecting the quality of justice is to be encouraged. Anything that we can do to avoid police time being wasted through adjournments and unnecessary waiting for cases to come on is again to be encouraged.

The evidence emanating from the pilot study in Leeds and from the other studies mentioned by the Minister suggest that the Bill's provisions will be effective in, among other things, achieving huge additional savings in the administration of justice.

The Lord Chancellor said in answer to a question from one of his noble Friends in the other place that he would make inquiries about how best to achieve the necessary changes in practice to ensure that police officers received adequate warning that they were no longer required in court. Is the Minister able to tell us the result of those inquiries? Three months have passed since the Lord Chancellor said that he would make them.

As proceedings on this Bill will, I trust, not be lengthy, the Minister will have extra time to read more carefully his written answers, if only for his own safety. If he reads column *786* of the written answers of 28 October in *Hansard* he will find that he answers as though he were the Lord Chancellor himself rather than his Parliamentary Secretary. If I may say so, the hon. Gentleman is becoming complacent. If this and earlier occasions are anything to go by, the Conservative party has done all his work for him. He cannot expect us to continue to check his written answers for him.

I hope that the Bill will be given a swift passage.

4.55 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): Before there is any doubt, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I refer you and right hon. and hon. Members to my entry in the register of interests as a partner in the solicitor's firm of Law, Hurst and Taylor.

I do not wish to incur the wrath of the House as my senior colleagues on both sides of the Chamber have been particularly brief. It is clear that the Bill is not a controversial measure. I welcome it because it is a useful step in speeding up the process of motoring cases that come before the magistrates courts, and the overwhelming number of cases that they deal with are precisely of the sort that the Bill looks towards.

This very day I have spoken to a senior clerk to the justices in my county of Essex. He thoroughly welcomes the proposals and believes that they will greatly aid the efficiency of the courts.

At present, the normal process is not to have a section 9 statement on the file. Having acted as a prosecutor in motoring cases in the past, I am well aware of the rudimentary nature of many of the motoring files that come before the courts. It would not be normal practice at present, as a first start, for there to be a section 9 statement on the files. The implementation of the Bill will mean that the police will have to change their process, and officers will have to ensure that each file has on it a section 9 statement, which thereafter can be used as

evidence in the court. If they do not do so, the case will be back where it was before and no progress will have been made. I am reassured by the pilot studies that the police believe that this is a useful innovation and that they—along with the Justices Clerks Society, no doubt—support it.

Clause 2, which deals with print-outs, takes up another cause of interminable delays in magistrates courts. Rarely is a print-out to be found upon the file at first hearing. Even if a defendant appears, the case will be adjourned to the next hearing if he does not have a licence for a print-out to be obtained. The licensing authority at Swansea is certainly better than it once was in providing print-outs, but there continue to be problems. Sometimes that is the fault of the defendant, who has not been accurate in giving his full name and date of birth. Sometimes searches need to be made against any number of names, and occasionally against more than one date of birth, to ascertain the correct details. Without that information, the print-out is abortive. Clause 2 is a useful addition to process in that both the print-out and the section 9 statement will be on the file.

Clause 3 allows the warrant for arrest to be issued using a section 9 statement, which is the substantiation of the case. That will allow the process to move to a conclusion in two hearings.

The Bill is not one of the monuments of legal reform. Those who practise in the courts will be aware that it will not overnight solve all the problems of delay. However, I am reassured by the fact that people who practise in the courts, given the aspects of the Bill that concern them, seem to have shown their support for it. The Bill makes a start with the speeding up of the process.

The rights of the defendant are preserved and remain untouched. If an error in the process occurs, and if someone is convicted without proper service, he can apply to the court with a declaration that he is not that person or that he was not served, and the process will be reopened.

The Bill has the advantage of preserving the liberty of the subject and speeding up the process. That is remarkable progress. Although the Bill is not large, the principles behind it are well founded.

5 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I must also declare an interest as a partner in a firm of solicitors. I am surprised that there are not more hon. Members present as some of them will have an interest in the Bill, especially the provisions that deal with motoring offences.

The Bill is uncontroversial and welcome. It has been considered in the other place, and its provisions have been widely scrutinised and investigated. There have been at least two pilot projects. However, by removing at least one procedural step in the process, it will place an even greater responsibility on the police to ensure that the facts, especially those set out in section 9 statements, are correct. Ministers will no doubt remind the police of their additional responsibilities under the Bill.

Some people, for genuine reasons, such as service abroad, will not receive a summons. As the Minister reminded the House, there are remedies for such individuals. I hope that Ministers will consider how notice of such remedies should be highlighted in the summons, and that the courts' existing right of recourse to the records of the DVLA will be drawn to the attention of defendants. I also hope that the Bill will pass speedily into law.

5.2 pm

Mr. Hoon: With the leave of the House, I shall respond briefly to the points made. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) on his considerable expertise in this area. In future, I shall know where to look for advice and assistance when the Department introduces technical measures dealing with the intricate details of administration in magistrates courts. He has shown by his remarks that he has considerable expertise, and I thank him for his support. He probably answered his own questions about section 9 statements and the use of the print-out. These provisions were tested in a number of pilot projects which I can assure him showed that the rights of defendants will be preserved and that the approach of the police is thoroughly satisfactory.

I thank the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) for his support. The only issue raised by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) concerned the attendance of police officers. There is no legal requirement on police officers to attend court when a plea of guilty by post has been entered under the section 12 procedure. It is, however, the customary practice of the Metropolitan police to provide for the routine attendance of a police prosecution liaison officer to handle multiple motoring cases, as the volume of motoring cases in the Metropolitan area is sufficiently high to make that a useful, time-saving measure. However, that does not seem to be the practice in provincial magistrates courts. There is always room for improvement in liaison and communication between the courts, police and prosecution, and my Department and others are continuing to work on various initiatives in support of that.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the matter, and I hope that he is satisfied by my response. I thank the House for allowing me a further opportunity to speak.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Fossil Fuel Levy Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

5.4 pm

The Minister for Science, Energy and Industry (Mr. John Battle): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill consists of only two clauses and is concerned entirely with the fossil fuel levy. It deals with the types of electricity on which the levy can be charged. It is important because the levy has an influence on electricity prices to consumers, a matter about which hon. Members on both sides of the House are doubtless concerned. It is also important because the levy is the main means of raising the funds used to support renewables technologies for the generation of electricity, a subject which is very important for the environment, for the tackling of our targets relating to global warming and for our future energy needs.

A soundly based levy is important if we are to drive forward those vital renewables technologies and provide a support system for them. The arrangements for supporting renewables in Northern Ireland are different from those in the rest of the United Kingdom, and the Bill will not extend there. The Bill will ensure that there is a level playing field in the generation of electricity, maintain the existing levy on nuclear electricity generated in England and Wales and bring under the levy for the first time imports of nuclear electricity from France. Making all electricity from nuclear sources—including electricity from abroad—subject to the levy, thus removing a market distortion, will produce savings of around £70 million for electricity consumers. Nuclear electricity will not have an unfair advantage over other sources of electricity, such as coal. Furthermore, the Bill will enhance support for renewable energy sources and ensure that the financing of the levy is put on a sound basis.

The purpose of the fossil fuel levy is to provide funds to support the development of technologies for electricity generation from renewable sources. The stimulation of generation from renewables is an important part of the Government's policy to achieve diverse, secure and sustainable supplies of electricity. Renewables generation also has an important part to play in securing our proposed target for the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. by 2010.

Support for renewables generation has not always been the main purpose of the levy. In the past, the greater part of the levy in England and Wales has been used to provide support for the nuclear electricity generating industry. That is no longer the case. The nuclear generation industry received more than £7 billion of support from the levy before the newer parts of it were privatised last year. Apart from some money still collected for Magnox plc and British Nuclear Fuels plc to repay them for undercollections in previous years, the proceeds of the levy are now used to support renewables, and, from next year, all the levy income will be used for that purpose. In the current year, the levy is expected to raise approximately £266 million, about 60 per cent. of which will be paid in support of renewables technologies.

Under the present arrangements, two types of electricity supplied by electricity suppliers licensed under the Electricity Act 1989 are subject to the fossil fuel levy: electricity from fossil fuel sources and electricity produced under the terms of the non-fossil fuel obligation or the Scottish renewables obligation arrangements. That means that, currently, electricity generated in England and Wales from nuclear sources under NFFO arrangements also attracts the levy.

All the output of nuclear generating stations in England and Wales is contracted under the primary nuclear contract, which is itself an NFFO arrangement. Consequently, that nuclear electricity is subject to the fossil fuel levy. The primary nuclear contract is due to expire on 31 March 1998 and, if no action is taken now, the nuclear electricity currently generated under that contract will no longer be subject to the levy. That would create slight upward pressure on the electricity price in England and Wales. It is that small upward movement in electricity price that the Bill will avert. I think that hon. Members will therefore welcome it.

The upward pressure on prices would happen because of the way in which the fossil fuel levy and the electricity market in England and Wales operate. Licensed electricity suppliers have a commercial incentive to minimise the cost of the electricity they purchase. When they buy electricity that is subject to the levy, they must also pay the levy on that electricity. In that way, the levy raises the costs of licensed electricity suppliers. In effect, the price of electricity to the supplier includes the cost of the levy. As a result, suppliers are willing to pay generators a higher price for levy-free electricity, provided the price does not exceed the total cost, including the levy, of leviable electricity.

As generators of electricity that does not attract the levy can command higher prices, the market is distorted in their favour. Without the Bill, nuclear electricity would be levy free from 1 April 1998 and benefit from precisely the market distortion that I have described. Although the amount raised by the levy is fixed, the cost of the market distortion would have to be met by electricity consumers in England and Wales. The effect that I have described is well known to companies in the electricity industry as the green ticket.

The Bill would prevent the distortion in favour of nuclear generators. It amends section 33 of the Electricity Act 1989 so that all electricity from nuclear sources supplied by licensed electricity suppliers will be subject to the fossil fuel levy. That will result in nuclear generators competing on equal terms with fossil fuel generators. That goes some way towards ensuring a level playing field.

In Scotland, the situation is different. Nuclear-sourced electricity is not subject to the Scottish renewables obligation or to the NFFO arrangements, so it is not subject to the levy. Instead, Scottish Nuclear has a contract, called the nuclear energy agreement, with Scottish Power and Scottish Hydro-Electric, under which it is required to provide all the electricity that it generates to Scottish Power and Scottish Hydro-Electric. That contract expires in 2005 and I am advised that the likely effect of the Bill in Scotland is that Scottish consumers can expect a small downward pressure on prices.

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford): Is my hon. Friend aware of the pressure that the coal industry is under and of the anxieties of miners, whom I represent, in Kellingley and Prince of Wales collieries for their future?

What are the Government doing to ensure that coal gets a fair deal in energy markets and can compete fairly on a level playing field?

Mr. Battle: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions. I am aware of her representations and those of many of my hon. Friends. We are concerned, not least because the main company is—how should I put it?—negotiating contracts, I hope, with the generators to ensure that there is a market for that coal. I understand that those conversations are going on—I should have hoped that they had gone on earlier—and I hope that they can be brought to a successful conclusion to ensure a future for Britain's coal industry.

We are taking action to do what we can to ensure that there are diverse and secure supplies of energy, including coal. I shall give some examples. Six things come immediately to mind. First, the Government are taking strong action to block subsidies to German and Spanish coal. Secondly, we have recently set up a review of the electricity pool—the buying mechanism through which electricity is sold—to ensure that there is a level playing field. Thirdly, we are ensuring that generators have to offer their unwanted coal-powered stations to RJB Mining.

Fourthly, we are encouraging the regulator to prevent generators from passing on excessive costs under the early take-or-pay gas contracts to ensure that there is no uneven playing field. Fifthly, my hon. Friend may appreciate that the Bill removes the advantage that nuclear and imported electricity from France enjoys—it will no longer be able to receive a subsidy, as it were, and distort the playing field. Sixthly, we are working hard to find ways in which to support clean-coal technology. Coal presents environmental challenges and we have to consider technological ways of addressing them to ensure that coal has a long-term future.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): I am much encouraged by some of the Minister's remarks, but are the Government prepared to amend and investigate the treaty that regulates imported electricity? That serious question goes back to a previous Labour Government. I do not want to make just a party political point, but that question requires some analysis.

On the questions of the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) about coal, following my Adjournment debate last week, I understood that there was to be a meeting on Monday or Tuesday between the Minister and representatives of the coal mining industry, but I understand that it has been delayed for weeks. Will the Minister explain why? Exactly how does he propose to handle the important questions of hon. Members on both sides of the House?

Mr. Battle: On the European rules, the Bill is well within the guidelines, as it were, and practice. We see no problems. The lines have been cleared so that we can ensure that the levy is applied and removes any inconsistencies. It is accepted in the energy market as a whole that the distortion is there; we are removing it. The aim is not to penalise French electricity, but it is unfair that it receives an extra that sources here do not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) asked for and arranged a meeting, and he wanted me and the Minister for the Environment to be present to ensure that energy, opencast mining and environmental questions were considered together. My hon. Friend the Minister had to go to America for a meeting on carbon dioxide emissions, so he said that he would not be available for the meeting. I was prepared to go ahead with it, but my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley thought that it would be better for the three of us to meet so that energy policy and the environment were considered together. We acceded to that wish and that is why the meeting has been postponed.

I am available to meet hon. Members individually or together at any time to discuss these important and serious matters. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make representations personally, I shall be happy to meet him.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): We appreciate the way in which my hon. Friend is collecting knowledge on the coal mining industry and we welcome some of his suggestions to address some of the imbalances in it. May I take up one of the six examples that he raised—generating electricity from gas? We are given to understand that, apart from perhaps the Drax power station, the majority of base load electricity is generated from gas even though in many instances its unit cost is higher than electricity generated from coal. Will he consider that customers of electricity-generating industries are not receiving the best possible value? In addition to making representations on that issue, will he check that matter and whether customers are getting the best value from the way in which the generating industry operates?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I know that the Minister is trying to be as helpful as possible, but I must point out to hon. Members that interventions must be brief if we are to have a proper debate. Some hon. Members have said that they want to catch my eye later, so we want the debate to flow.

Mr. Battle: I appreciate that hon. Members want to raise the wider issues and I will respond in that spirit within your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My understanding is that the power stations that go straight into base load are nuclear. The levy will even the playing field because they will no longer be in a position to do that. The real base loaders have been the nuclear generators.

I accept that there is concern about gas. There is an argument about the unit cost of gas versus the unit cost of coal. Some say that the unit cost of coal is lower; others that that of gas is lower. I cannot go into the details now. Last month, the electricity regulator capped the generation costs that can be passed on to the electricity supplier. We must not forget that there are a number of players: the people who dig the coal in the mines, the power stations, the transmission system and the regional electricity supply companies. Those companies will not now be able to pass on to their customers the costs of the so-called sweetheart deals for high-priced, gas-fired power that they signed under the previous Administration. That move was made in response to requests by my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) and others.

The six key actions that I have described—I shall now add a seventh, on gas—are not just ideas thought up tonight, but actions that have already been taken. We came into office six months ago last Saturday and

[Mr. Battle]

we have had to deal with the problems that we inherited. We have taken careful and patient steps to ensure that there is a genuine level playing field. We must ensure that other sources of fuel, including coal, are not treated unfairly and priced out of the market. It is in that spirit that this Bill should help in the short-term, as well as in the medium and longer term.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The Minister referred to clean-coal technology. Is it his intention to extend the levy to embrace research and development into that technology? He referred to supporting the technology, but he did not say how that would happen.

Mr. Battle: We have seriously considered that matter. Indeed, when the Bill was in the other place Lord Ezra tried to move a related amendment, but it was ruled out of order by the Clerks and the lawyers who advise us on our proceedings. Lord Ezra's proposal did not fit into the scope of the Bill because it dealt with raising the levy, not with spending it.

One purpose of our review of the non-fossil fuel obligation is to determine what we can do to support clean-coal technology. That means not only connecting what has been happening in the energy directorate, but linking that to what has been happening in science, engineering and technology under the Office of Science and Technology. Research has been and is being funded, but we need to move forward and get that to the market.

It is not generally understood that it will not be the Government who build the first clean coal-powered station, any more than the Government build a particular laboratory. It will be done by a company, and there are some who are already coming forward with practical proposals to use that technology to provide a cleaner way to burn coal. We welcome that and want to respond as positively as we can. Unfortunately, this Bill is not an appropriate vehicle for doing that because it deals with revenue raising, not revenue spending.

Mr. Cash: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Minister is referring to the Bill and its long title. As it is a Government Bill, it would have been perfectly possible for the Government to have adjusted the long title in the light of the difficulties experienced in the House of Lords. I do not know whether there would have been merit in doing so, but I find the hon. Gentleman's argument difficult to follow.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The long title of the Bill is a matter for the Government. It was established at the point of the Bill's inception. I am allowing a wide debate on the subject. If the hon. Gentleman and others have points that are germane to the Bill and its effects, I am sure that they will have the opportunity to put them.

Mr. Battle: It may seem that our intention is to deal with the fact that the nuclear industry does not have to pay the levy. The Bill was conceived, and the long title written out, very early on in this Parliament. It has been discussed in the other place and it is only since then that, in the light of the questions being asked in the coal industry—because one of the players in that industry was not negotiating the contracts—there has been pressure to extend the long title of this single-purpose Bill.

We were ahead of the game in tackling the uneven playing field on the import of French nuclear energy. We cannot now change this Bill to deal with the questions that have arisen. I can only tell hon. Members that we will do our utmost to back clean-coal technology as a way of guaranteeing a future for coal burning.

Although the Bill provides a welcome downward pressure on electricity prices in Great Britain, we need to be concerned about the effect on the nuclear generators that will forgo the opportunity to benefit from the market distortions I have described. Nuclear-generated electricity accounts for some 25 per cent.—that is the annual average—of total supplies in Great Britain. As long ago as 1995, the previous Government flagged up the need to review the issue. That was reported in *Hansard* on 27 July 1995. The question mark over the future of the non-leviable status was raised by Labour when we were in opposition, when we debated the privatisation of the nuclear industry and British Energy. That question mark was confirmed at the time of the privatisation of British Energy, so the markers have been down since then. The industry is well aware of that and, with proper prudence, will have taken account of the possibility of this Bill in their planning process.

Hon. Members will be concerned about the Bill's effect on imports of electricity from France. I must make it clear that we are not in the business of discriminating against French electricity. We will fully abide by our European Union obligations. As soon as the proposals in the Bill enter into effect, all French imports will be subject to the fossil fuel levy. The market will not then be distorted in a way which encourages people to buy French nuclear electricity instead of domestic supplies. It is right that British generators should be able to compete on equal terms with the French. I am determined that British electricity should not be disadvantaged any longer.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, speaking at the Earth summit in New York, underlined the Government's determination to put environmental concerns at the heart of the decision-making process. We have set ourselves challenging targets on cutting carbon dioxide emissions. While we must be practical about what we can achieve in the short term, new and renewable energy sources, including wind, hydro, wave, waste, biomass and solar, can and will make a significant contribution to achieving those targets and to longer-term sustainable energy use both in this country and internationally as we move into the 21st century.

Last year, renewables generators, including large-scale hydro-electric plants, supplied a mere 2 per cent. of the United Kingdom's total demand for electricity. The majority of renewable electricity is supplied by hydro generation, mostly based in Scotland. Generation from renewable sources other than large-scale hydro plants increased by 7 per cent. in 1996. In England, Wales and Scotland, there are currently 195 renewables generation projects generating electricity under the NFFO arrangements. Further projects are planned.

We want to ensure that there is continued growth in generation from renewables. As a first step, I have already announced that I intend to make a further NFFO order,

which will encourage a range of renewables technologies in the current framework of support. I hope to make an announcement about that later this year.

On 6 June 1997—to meet our aims and to determine how we will provide targeted and effective support for renewables technologies—the Government announced a review of new and renewables energy policy. The review will include an examination of what is necessary and practical to provide 10 per cent. of the United Kingdom's electricity from renewable energy sources by 2010. We do not intend that productive avenues of support should be rejected or that sensible reforms should be ignored. As soon as I am able to do so, we will present the results of the review to the House.

For those sound reasons, the Bill empowers the Secretary of State to make all electricity supplied by licensed electricity suppliers subject to the levy. The power will enable the levy's scope to be extended to include renewables electricity that is produced outside the NFFO and the Scottish renewables obligation arrangements, such as large-scale hydro plants.

It may be that—as I should like to happen—as renewables technology progresses and is able to compete directly with other types of plant, renewables plants no longer need the benefit of levy-free status. They should therefore be drawn into the levy so that they can support other sources of renewables that require development. If we reach that point, we will have to think carefully about whether resources can be better targeted on newer emerging renewables technologies.

The Bill has only two clauses and I did not expect it to prove so controversial. Nevertheless, I hope that the House will not divide on it but will welcome it. It creates a level playing field and takes practical action—even in the short time that the Government have had in which to do so.

5.31 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I reassure the Minister, and the nervous Government Whip, that the Opposition will not seek to divide the House on the Bill. I can only say, however, that it is an orphan of a Bill. In the other place, Lord Haskel attacked the Bill's title, saying he believed that it was inadequate. Now the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry, who is in charge of the Bill in the House, has admitted to us that the Bill is inadequate and out of time and that it does not cover half the issues that he wished it could cover. In this debate and in Committee, we shall certainly be probing those points and ways in which the Bill can be improved.

The Bill is the second one in a week from the Department of Trade and Industry, and it is yet another Bill about tax. Last week, the House considered a Bill to tax the airwaves—which would be the 18th tax increase since the Government came to power. This week, we are debating a Bill to tax the real waves—wave power and wind power—which would be the Government's 19th tax increase. The Minister was a little bashful about that aspect of the Bill. He did not reveal to us that the Bill will not only extend the levy to the nuclear industry, for entirely understandable reasons, but that it proposes to allow the Government to take power to extend the levy to all types of renewable energy.

In another place, it was explained that the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry has not yet decided whether to exercise that power. He does not yet have a programme to exercise that power, but he wants the House to give him such power. Hon. Members are entitled at least to ask him why he is taking under the Bill the rather bizarre power to tax renewable energy to support renewable energy. It is a rather curious concept, particularly now. Just as successive non-fossil fuel obligations are working to achieve price convergence, the Department of Trade and Industry proposes a levy or fresh tax on precisely the energy resources that we originally attempted to encourage in the levy itself. I really wonder what type of incentive is being provided to producers of wind power and of hydro-electric power.

Mr. Battle: The hon. Gentleman said that it is a tax-raising Bill, but it is a tax-reducing Bill. Its net effect will be to reduce the levy by 0.5 per cent.—which is not a major reduction but is heading in the right direction.

Mr. Fallon: The Minister knows very well that a levy is a tax. His somewhat excitable June press release claiming that the Bill would somehow save £70 million cannot be justified. Everyone knows that the nuclear industry would have been brought within the levy's scope and that the savings that he suggested are purely hypothetical. If he believes that what he has just said is accurate, perhaps he will tell the House—given that so much hydro-electric power is produced in Scotland—what the likely price increase will be for Scottish electricity consumers because of the Bill.

The levy is reasonably well established by now, although, with its different bands and orders, it has become relatively bureaucratic. Opposition Members believe that, if the levy is to be continued and applied as the Minister would like it to be—to all non-fossil fuel sources—we will have to be much clearer about the levy's aims and about how it will be spent.

We have to admire the Minister's candour. He said that it is simply a Bill about raising the levy, and that we cannot talk about how the levy will be spent. He even suggested that that matter might be dealt with most appropriately by another Bill or on some other day. That is a curious concept for a measure that raises revenue designed for a specific purpose. Nevertheless, the Minister cannot bring himself to widen the Bill's scope to include clearer objectives, so that Parliament and electricity consumers can see what they are getting for the extra cost involved in raising the levy.

Opposition Members should like the levy to be justified—as it must always be justified to Parliament—against the background of a much clearer energy policy. The Government justify it based simply on a Government review. By my calculation, six different reviews are in progress, making it impossible for hon. Members to reach a firm view on the levy level or the types of programme on which it should be spent.

First, there is the Minister's own review of renewables. What has happened to that review since he announced it? Why is he proceeding with the Bill before we have the result of that review, and therefore before we can discern a little more clearly exactly which forms of renewable energy are worth supporting and before we can thereby justify the levy?

Secondly, a separate review of clean-coal technology is in progress, which, in another place, Lord Haskel confirmed is a fully fledged review. I think that many

[Mr. Fallon]

Labour Members would like to have a clearer idea of the results of the review on clean-coal technology before we attempt to justify this levy.

Thirdly, the Minister's Department is conducting a more general review of the utilities, of the electricity regulator and of his power to impose controls and tax on the electricity industry. We do not have the results of that review either.

Fourthly and—bizarrely again—outside the Minister's own Department, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is conducting a review of combined heat and power. The results of that review, too, should be important to anyone considering the fossil fuel industry, its future and the type of levy that we impose on it.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): The hon. Gentleman is using various arguments to request justification of the fossil fuel levy. Can he tell the House what justification was given when the levy was first introduced, in 1990? If he can, he is certainly a better man than the previous President of the Board of Trade, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine).

Mr. Fallon: The hon. Gentleman will recall that the levy was originally introduced at the time of electricity privatisation. Indeed, it was introduced in the statute that gave effect to the original White Paper on electricity. It was felt that it was worth continuing to support non-fossil fuel sources of energy, including the nuclear and renewables options. That was the purpose of the levy, and successive orders have slowly developed and encouraged different forms of renewable energy in particular and have ensured that they play their part in providing the electricity available to generators. That is why we are a little surprised that the Minister is taking a power—he is being fair to the House and is not, I presume, proposing to exercise it immediately—to tax the very renewables that we have encouraged through the levy. We are hoping for an explanation of that.

I was concluding the list of reviews whose results we need to see before we proceed with the levy. The fifth is the Minister's own review, which is a welcome review of the electricity pool arrangements. The Minister will admit that one of the objectives of that review almost certainly is to see whether the price of the base load effected through the electricity pool needs to be changed and whether it can be made more transparent and competitive by reducing the dominance of the base load by only a handful of generators. Again, we should have the results of that review before we go any further with the business of extending the levy.

The final and sixth relevant review is the Finance Act review, a duty imposed by the House through the Finance Act on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to review the consequences of reducing value added tax on all energy-saving materials. The Chancellor promised us the results of that review by 31 October. That is important because it is only through the results of that review that we shall be able to see how the Government reconcile their target, which is a welcome target, of reducing CO_2 emissions by 20 per cent. by 2025—25 per cent. of those emissions come from residential homes—with their decision to cut VAT to 5 per cent., a decision which will increase residential emissions by some 250,000 tonnes of carbon every year. That decision will cost the Government some £485 million in the forthcoming financial year, a sum equal to nearly twice the amount that will be raised by the levy under discussion. We need to be told how the Minister is going to reconcile those two policies.

Unless the Minister can give us an explanation, we will be bound to say that the Government are confused. On the one hand, they want to encourage the greater use of energy by cutting VAT on energy; on the other, they are committed to reducing it. The Government are now proposing to tax non-nuclear sources. If I was feeling uncharitable, I could describe the Bill as a pretty anti-green Bill. I wonder how the Minister's greener friends would welcome a Bill which, for the first time, gives him the power to tax the very sources of renewable energy that we have been trying to encourage for so long.

We might be more charitable towards the Minister and the Bill if he were doing something about the fossil fuel industry. I suspect that the very good attendance for this debate, especially by Labour Members, reflects a widespread concern about what the Minister is doing about our coal industry. While he tinkers with the levy, as Members with closer connections to mining constituencies than I know better than I, some 50,000 jobs are at stake—20,000 in the coal industry and 30,000 in related services.

Mr. Battle: When the hon. Gentleman was previously a Member of Parliament representing, I think, Darlington, he was the parliamentary private secretary to the Secretary of State for Energy. Later, in 1993, he appeared on a programme called "The Power Game" on Tyne Tees Television and said:

> "With hindsight, we privatised things in the wrong order. Perhaps we ought to have privatised the coal industry first.
>
> It should be run like a business and I wish we had handed it over to the great mining companies in this country, like RTZ.
>
> It is all about going out and finding the cheapest source of power, not about employing people in mines."

Now let the hon. Gentleman read out his list of the unemployed to me.

Mr. Fallon: Let me make it clear to the Minister that I do not withdraw one of those remarks. Had we introduced private finance into the coal industry earlier, the industry would certainly be in better health than it is now. I remind the Minister what happened the last time British Coal came to a Government with a list of proposed closures. The Conservative Government did not wash their hands of the industry. On the contrary, they imposed a moratorium on pit closures, as those in the House at the time will remember. They encouraged negotiations with the generators on new coal contracts. We did not simply say, as the Minister is now saying, that we hoped that the contracts would be concluded; we encouraged the generators to reach a successful conclusion of those contracts. Indeed, that was the purpose of the moratorium that we imposed on pit closures. We also introduced private finance into the coal industry, something which I wish we had done earlier, to give pits a better chance of being saved.

Mr. Clapham: The hon. Gentleman refers to colliery closures. Is he aware that in 1993, the Select Committee

on Trade and Industry reported to the then President of the Board of Trade and made 39 recommendations which would have created a market for 65 million tonnes of coal and ensured the industry's future? However, the President of the Board of Trade threw out all the recommendations and caused the crisis that we now face.

Mr. Fallon: No, I do not accept that. In fact, it was the President of the Board of Trade who imposed the original moratorium on the list of pit closures presented to the House.

I ask hon. Members to choose whose words they support. Last Wednesday, there was a rather truncated Adjournment debate on the coal industry secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). The Minister replied to that debate. Hon. Members would have had a better chance to contribute had it not been for the extraordinary scenes that we witnessed during the debate on the Wireless Telegraphy Bill, which involved Labour Members reading out telephone directories.

In *The Times* of 24 October, Rev. John Roden, the industrial chaplain for the coal areas of Selby, is reported as describing the Government's position on energy policy as pathetic. He said:

"There is widespread disillusionment—95 per cent. of miners voted for a Labour Government. I doubt if they will again."

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): I challenge the hon. Gentleman to come to the coalfield areas in and around Nottingham that I represent and to those represented by other Labour Members and to ask people there whom they choose to run the coal industry—the Tories or a Labour Government who are trying to deal with the mess left by the previous Government.

Mr. Fallon: I am happy to accept that challenge. I hope that the miners whom the hon. Gentleman represents are happy with the Minister's intervention and with what is allegedly being done, or not done, to save the collieries now at risk. It is getting very late in the day to save some of those collieries, and I should like the Minister to be a little more active in that respect. Indeed, if the Minister has a fossil fuel policy, let us not have it in dribs and drabs—a few words in last Wednesday's Adjournment debate and some words of comfort tucked away in his speech today. Instead, let him publish his policy and then organise a debate on it so that the hon. Member for Selby (Mr. Grogan) and other Labour Members who have a genuine and long-standing interest in the coal industry can consider what can be done to help the coalfields. I accept that those hon. Members might want to criticise our performance in government—that is fair enough—but the Labour party is in government now.

I have made it clear that we shall not oppose the Bill tonight, but we shall continue to seek useful opportunities to let the House speak for our coalfields. We shall seek clarification in Committee on the muddle that is the Government's energy policy. We shall also seek to ensure that the new, wider levy powers are properly accountable to Parliament and are used for clearly defined objectives.

5.50 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): The fossil fuel levy should have been called the nuclear subsidy, because it is clearly a subsidy to the nuclear industry. Between 1990 and 31 March 1998, when the levy comes to an end, it will have raised more than £9 billion to subsidise the nuclear industry. In other words, we have all had a levy on our electricity bills so that the nuclear industry can remain viable.

I asked the Conservative spokesman why the fossil fuel levy had been introduced, because when the Select Committee on Trade and Industry considered the issue for its report, "British Energy Policy and the Market for Coal", published in January 1993, we asked the then President of the Board of Trade and the chairman of Nuclear Electric the same question. There was a great deal of confusion in the comments made then and people appeared to be unaware of the purpose of the levy. The report says, on page 62, paragraph 121:

"The President told us that it is 'a charge on the consumer in order to enable the nuclear industry both to clean up and to provide for cleaning up the old nuclear plants.'"

When the same question was put to the chairman of Nuclear Electric, he said:

"The purpose of the Levy is really two-fold: to comply with the Secretary of State's 9 November 1989 statement that Nuclear Electric should be cash positive and, secondly, to help fund pre-existing liabilities."

That was added to by the finance director of Nuclear Electric, who said that

"the Levy was never attached to any particular cash flow that Nuclear Electric has to pay. It was specifically described to ensure that Nuclear Electric remained cash-positive."

In other words, nobody knew what the purpose of the levy was.

When the Select Committee started to look at Nuclear Electric's balance sheet, we saw that £3 billion of the levy income available to it from 1990 to 1998 was used for other purposes. It is, in fact, being used to fund an investment programme. We know that a huge capital investment programme was launched from the levy. Sizewell B was built with money raised on the levy. The levy has enabled Nuclear Electric to fund its large capital programme without incurring debt. It was clearly a subsidy to provide the nuclear industry with cash for investment and to ensure a positive cash flow.

The Select Committee was concerned about the huge amounts of money being raised and used in that way and recommended that there should be other uses for the levy. Paragraph 127, on page 64 of the report, says:

"Our recommendation would make it possible either to reduce the Levy or to use an average of £380 million a year during the remaining five years of the Levy for other purposes".

Those "other purposes" were clean-coal technology. When the report was debated in the House, the President of the Board of Trade rejected all 39 recommendations. We are facing the current dilemma because the money that could have been made available for investment in clean-coal technology was never realised.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: I am sure that my hon. Friend will include the Grimethorpe scheme, which made extensive research into clean-coal technology. If the Conservative Government had not withdrawn funding, we would have had clean-coal technology by now. What is my hon. Friend's view on that?

Mr. Clapham: I thank my hon. Friend for that prompting. The endeavour at Grimethorpe colliery was

[Mr. Clapham]

supported by 20 other countries. It would have provided the opportunity to deal with our problems on the burning of fossil fuels, as well as enormous opportunities for British exports. Unfortunately, following the closure of Grimethorpe, the experimental plant was quickly demolished.

The fossil fuel levy, or nuclear subsidy, has contributed to keeping United Kingdom electricity costly for United Kingdom consumers. The Select Committee was so concerned that it recommended that a large part of the levy should be used for other purposes. That did not happen because the President of the Board of Trade did not accept the recommendations, which has left us with the dilemma that we are facing.

At Kyoto in December, the Government will take the lead to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases world wide. Some commentators have suggested that the Government face a difficult choice between the environment and maintaining a United Kingdom deep coal mining industry. I do not believe that to be the case. It is possible for the Government to take a clear lead on environmental issues, while providing a framework for a stable coal industry.

I came into the Chamber a little late. I heard my hon. Friend the Minister referring to several initiatives, but I may have missed some. If I refer to issues that he has already covered, I apologise.

The United Kingdom has already made significant reductions in CO_2 emissions. The advances that have been made in the UK are not always appreciated. Since 1970, emissions have fallen by 20 per cent. Emissions from coal burning have fallen by 52 per cent. during that period, although emissions from transport have almost doubled. Between 1990 and 1995, emissions from power stations fell by 18.5 per cent. Clean-coal technology, together with combined heat and power, can cut CO_2 emissions by up to 50 per cent. compared with conventional coal plant. That takes CO_2 emissions down to the same level as that of a gas-fired power station. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister is prepared to consider coal-burning heat and power units.

CO_2 emissions from developing countries are rising at an alarming rate. It is estimated that they represent 35 per cent. of total emissions and predicted that they will rise to 50 per cent. by 2020. The main two sources of those emissions are China and India. To give the House an idea of the expansion of coal burning using conventional plant in China, let me point out that China is adding 15 GW of coal-fired generating capacity every year. That is an enormous amount, equivalent to half the total UK electricity capacity being added every year. Earlier, I mentioned export opportunities. The worldwide implementation of clean-coal technology is essential if we are to tackle the problem of global warming in the long term. Simply closing coal mines in the United Kingdom will have little effect.

As the Minister knows, the problem has been made worse because the electricity market is not cost reflective. The pool system is price reflective. When he reviews the pool system, I hope that he concentrates on making the pool reflect costs rather than price. If that happened, coal-fired power stations, which are the cheapest on the grid, would be available for base load use, rather than being pushed out of the market.

Having heard what the Minister said, I believe that he is looking at a framework in the short and medium term to give UK coal mining a stable future. Such a policy will allow the Government to preserve employment, contribute to energy diversity and take a lead on the environment. Those objectives are mutually compatible. We can have a diversified energy policy in which coal makes its contribution and, using clean-coal technology, we can meet the environmental targets that we have set ourselves. As my hon. Friend the Minister already knows, miners at some collieries fear that they face redundancy by Christmas. There is not much time. I urge him to take the necessary decisions over the next few months to ensure that coal survives as part of electricity production in Britain and that miners' jobs are preserved.

6.2 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The Bill's stated intention to remove a potential anomaly in the market when the nuclear contracts change next year is in itself uncontroversial, but it is wrapped in a permissive form that endows the Minister with additional powers. To introduce it when reviews are still under way and before we know their conclusions raises broader issues.

The fossil fuel levy, and the non-fossil fuel obligation that it finances, was a successful policy introduced by the previous Government. It was intended to support renewable technologies as they moved towards convergence with market pricing. After seven years of the NFFO regime, more than 200 projects are in operation and nearly 500 MW of renewable power is being generated. In the last NFFO round, the average bid price was more than 1p per kWh lower than in the previous one. The regime has fostered the development of renewable technologies and has been a success.

The Minister now asks the House to approve a broadening of the base of the levy and to give him greater discretion in applying it, without giving us any information about spending plans. I understood his point on that and I, too, have read the debates in another place. I understand that the Bill is strictly related to the revenue-raising side of the equation, but the spending side is also important if we are to understand what sort of scale of levy we might be letting ourselves in for. This is essentially an hypothecated tax that falls on electricity consumers, and its level will be determined entirely by the Government's spending intentions.

Mr. Battle: The hon. Gentleman is a little confused. The amount of the levy now and in future is entirely dependent on the cost of support for renewables that come in on a bidding round each year. It is not a tax-raising measure in the way that he suggests. That has always been the case and will remain so. He cannot make such an analogy and say, "This is a tax, tell us how much will be spent." We wait for people to bid for different projects. His Government set that up; I thought that it was heading in the direction of being helpful, and we want to continue that. He cannot have it both ways.

Mr. Hammond: I understood the Minister perfectly. I think that I was heading in the right direction. I am seeking to establish whether the Minister's review, and the other Government reviews, could lead to a broadening of the scope of the NFFO obligation, which would be

financed from the fossil fuel levy. At present, the levy is low and the marketplace distortion that we are talking about avoiding would be relatively small. Are we being asked to avoid a market-distorting anomaly to deal with the much more serious situation that would arise if, after the conclusions of the Government reviews, the levy were to be raised as a result of the broadening of the NFFO commitments to take in other areas?

We have heard already about clean-coal technology. Is it possible that support for clean-coal technologies might be included within the remit of the NFFO arrangements and thus fall on the fossil fuel levy? Might additional energy-saving insulation measures be included? Might the promotion of other technologies not currently within the very narrow remit of the NFFO regime fall there as a result of the reviews? I merely seek reassurance that we are not paving the way for a potentially open-ended tax on electricity consumers to finance Government projects that may in their own right be laudable, such as the greenhouse gas reduction targets and the increased renewable energy targets. If the levy is allowed to become an open-ended tax on energy consumers, it will seriously affect consumers and the competitiveness of British business.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend rightly mentions concerns about the extent of the levy and its impact on electricity consumers. Is he aware of Eastern Electricity's proposal to invite electricity consumers voluntarily to pay a tariff to go towards the support of renewable technologies? Is not that a preferable way in which to move?

Mr. Hammond: My hon. Friend anticipates my next point. The non-fossil fuel obligation has undoubtedly been a success, but we must ask ourselves where we should go in future. There is evidence that many consumers are willing to pay a premium for renewable, or green, energy. Studies in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and even limited market experience, have already shown that there is a potential market for green electricity. That offers us the prospect of less need for taxation through the levy and the subsidy of renewable energy, and a greater choice for consumers, who can make the decision for themselves to pay for green power.

I should be grateful if the Minister confirmed how broad the review is which is currently under way and to what extent it interfaces with the other reviews in his Department and elsewhere in Government on energy-related issues. Can he assure us that there is no danger that, in future, the fossil fuel levy will be used to finance a broader range of initiatives other than the renewable energy initiative that it currently supports? It is important for us to understand the scale of the levy that we are being asked to pave the way for.

The Minister is taking general powers to subject to the levy renewables outside the NFFO. He may have in mind large-scale hydro projects. Can he assure us that the Bill will not be used at some future stage to move the goalposts for renewable energy technologies that are moving towards convergence and which see on the horizon the possibility of operating unsupported and unsubsidised in the market? The levy may be a small element, but it would be sending the wrong signals, for example, to those considering large-scale wind projects to move the goalposts now and to suggest that, as they moved outside the NFFO framework, they would be subjected to the levy.

Can the Minister also assure us that when he considers the imposition of the levy on hydro projects at some future date, he will take special care when dealing with the pumped storage facilities that exist in north Wales? I say that for two reasons. First, it seems iniquitous that electricity that is generated from potential energy that has been created in the first place by the use of leviable electricity should be subjected to a levy again. That is equivalent to an element of double taxation. Secondly, and perhaps more important, I share the aspirations of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on the growth and creation of a green power market in the United Kingdom at the level of the consumer. The ability to store green power—as far as I am aware, the only effective way in which to do that with present technology is through pumped storage—is critical to allowing that market to develop. I hope that the Minister will not do anything to discourage that development.

Can the Minister assure us that there will be no temptation to impose other than a uniform rate of levy through the Bill? In other words, can he assure me that he will not seek to micro-manage the energy equation, by applying different rates of levy to different sectors of the industry? Can he give us an idea of the specific time scale of the reviews that he mentioned? How will they relate to the NFFO 5 announcement, which I believe will be made later this year?

6.13 pm

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I support the comments of the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) about some of the issues that he raised. We should use the fossil fuel levy to introduce a comprehensive energy policy, which I hope would include clean-coal technology. It is important that we have a comprehensive energy policy that includes coal, gas, nuclear power and the renewables that have been referred to in the debate.

I cannot support the hon. Gentleman's demand for an explanation from my hon. Friend the Minister about where the money gained from the fossil fuel levy will be spent. As my hon. Friend has already made clear, he is open to bids for the most efficient and cost-effective use of that money. That is the right approach. Before my hon. Friend makes any final declaration, I hope that he will take into consideration the request made by hon. Members, the electricity generating industry and the coal industry to pump-prime clean-coal technology.

When we consider the development of the energy industry in the near future and in the long term, coal should be given its rightful place as a provider of a resource for the generation of electricity. There is an abundance of it and it is now produced so efficiently that, in the past six years, production per man shift has increased enormously, while costs have fallen by nearly 50 per cent. Not all of that cost reduction has, however, been passed on to the consumers of electricity.

When we consider the use of the money gained from the levy, it is important that we think about the future of the entire generating industry. I plead for the retention of the mining industry, at least at its present capacity.

[Mr. Bill O'Brien]

With regard to the future of the fossil fuel levy and the possibility of using other sources to generate electricity, the contracts between the coal industry and the electricity generating industries should be extended for a further period until those industries have settled down to a stable future. That cannot be achieved until we have addressed the problem of imports.

I was pleased to note that the Minister said that the Government are doing everything they can to tackle the problem of subsidies on imported coal, because they put our miners at a disadvantage. We are asking not for favours, but for fairness. We should not be importing coal that is subsidised when our people have to produce it at unit cost. I am pleased that the Minister has made it clear that he will take that factor into account.

We should extend the contracts between the coal industry and the electricity generating industries until we have a level playing field—it is more like a battlefield at the moment. It is important that that problem is resolved, because it is not just miners and mining communities that have suffered, but the engineering and manufacturing industries. If one visits West Yorkshire, one can see the factories where thousands used to be employed in the manufacture of equipment for the mining industry. They, too, have lost out. That is why it is important that we have a proper policy on the generation of electricity.

I accept that the terms of the Bill are narrow, and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the future of the coal industry. I want to make it clear to the Minister that because of the problems facing our constituents, and our comrades and colleagues in industry—mining, manufacturing and engineering—my hon. Friends and I are speaking not from the head, but from the heart. What we are looking for is a comprehensive energy policy. With the support of my hon. Friend the Minister, and by following up some of the points that he made tonight, we can reach that goal in the near future.

I accept that the question of emissions is still outstanding, but it is more important to address the problem of sulphur dioxide than that of carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide makes up about 2 per cent. of total pollution, so we should be paying greater attention to the other 98 per cent. Although a view has to be taken on the environment, we can achieve our aims in that respect through clean-coal technology.

In considering the fossil fuel levy and how the revenue is to be distributed, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to take account of the plea made here tonight. I would ask him, if he can, to influence the extension of the contracts, to allow the coal industry and the electricity generators to get their act together. They must deal with the problem of subsidised and therefore cheap imported coal. There is also the question of the level playing field in electricity generation involving nuclear power and the fact that electricity imported from France will no longer be subsidised. The latter problem has been a crime within the industry for some time, but is now to be resolved via the Bill.

Finally, when my hon. Friend the Minister is taking applications on where to spend the money, will he consider making a contribution to the national coal mining museum in West Yorkshire? I doubt whether any hon. Member would object, and the museum is in need of some assistance.

6.21 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The Liberal Democrats have no objection to the Bill, so we will not divide the House either. I thank the Minister for his positive and helpful presentation of the case, but I want to register some concerns and I hope that he will feel able to respond when winding up the debate.

We are concerned, first, about what the fossil fuel levy does not cover and, secondly, about what it apparently does cover. There is also the overriding issue of how it fits into a strategy to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent. by 2010. We are a third of the way through the two decades between 1990 and 2010, so we need to hear how the Government expect to reach that minus 20 per cent. figure.

I am pleased to see that the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) is back with us. The Conservatives seemed to find themselves caught betwixt and between various policies. I was interested in their contention that they had clean hands—the debate so far has been about clean coal, not clean hands—but we should remember that the changes in carbon dioxide emissions seen so far have largely been the accidental by-product of decisions on the coal industry taken by the previous Conservative Government.

First, I shall look at some of the things that the fossil fuel levy does not cover. In another place, Lord Ezra pointed out that it does not cover solar heating, anaerobic digestion or solar-voltaics. Some of those are remote and esoteric topics; solar heating is often seen as somewhat impracticable in this country, yet most Members of Parliament have solar-heated homes, which is why we do not have our central heating on in July and August.

I want the Minister to give an assurance that, in parallel with this legislation and fully recognising that the Bill is limited in its intention, he will widen the scope for those forms of renewable energy technology that will be eligible to make bids. The Minister was rather obscure when he said that the bid system would dictate the level of the levy. In fact, there is a framework within which those bids can be made and it would be good to hear that it will be as wide as possible, so as to include the topics raised by other hon. Members and by Lord Ezra.

I am also concerned about what it seems the levy might include. I was going to quote from *Utility Week*, but I do not need to, because the Minister made my point. The point is that there are circumstances in which the levy would be imposed on renewable energy source producers. That is entirely self defeating and quite wrong, and the Liberal Democrats will certainly oppose any such move. It cannot be right to use the levy to worsen the economics of renewable energy production and then to take the money and invest it in improving the economics of renewable energy production. When talking about the nuclear industry and the need to ensure that the levy covered it, the Minister mentioned removing the market distortion. It would be perverse to remove the market distortion in one sector and impose it in another. I hope that the Minister will feel able, on mature reflection, to give assurances about the scope of, and the intention behind, his remarks.

I want to raise two other matters: first, the level of the levy and, secondly, clean-coal technology, which has been the topic of much of the debate so far. Both are linked to

the answer to the question: how does the Bill fit into the overall Government target of reducing carbon dioxide emissions?

The levy has been reduced significantly since it was first introduced, which has—at least notionally—cut the amount available for the development of renewable and sustainable energy production. When the levy was reduced along with support for renewable energy, it was opposed by Liberal Democrat Members. I believe that the Minister said that, from next year, 100 per cent. of the levy would go towards renewable energy production. That would seem likely to raise the total amount invested from about £160 million to about £260 million. If I have interpreted the Minister's remarks correctly, that is very welcome, but it will be interesting to hear from the hon. Gentleman whether we are in fact back to neutral yet, or whether, next year, we will still be investing less than we were at the beginning.

Lord Ezra, the Trades Union Congress and many Labour Members have made the point that the fossil fuel levy ought to be available for so-called clean-coal technology. I do not want to endorse those sentiments entirely. We must recognise that the cleanest conceivable coal-burning technology is still dirtier than any form of renewable energy generation and almost certainly dirtier than gas.

However, it is significant that, whatever cleaner sources of energy generation are used in the United Kingdom until 2010 and beyond, much of the developing world will be increasingly heavily dependent on coal for its energy needs. The hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) mentioned China and India, which cannot realistically expand their energy use without expanding their use of coal. Both, incidentally, are also investing heavily in renewable energy.

Whatever one's view of how coal production should develop in this country, there is a healthy and expanding export market for clean coal technology, and it would be good to hear from the Minister that he intends to foster a climate in which British expertise can be profitably exported.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill and will support it, but we want to hear from the Government that it forms part of a coherent strategy to achieve the reduction in carbon dioxide emissions that the Government have set themselves. Failure to put the Bill in that wider context, for reasons of short-term political expediency, would be a great shame and a great hindrance to the achievement of targets that will prove to be vital to this country and the whole world.

6.30 pm

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): The Minister's speech was most welcome and he is to be congratulated on it. He has offered hope to many of the miners who live in and around my constituency and in Nottinghamshire, and to miners' families and communities throughout the country. It is all very well for the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) to cast aspersions, but the Minister has had to deal in the past few months with the appalling situation that he inherited. In meetings with miners and others in the industry, the Minister has tried to deal with the practical problems that he inherited.

Some of the points that the Minister made deserve to be widely disseminated throughout the country. He promised a review of pool prices. Many people in the coal industry feel that prices are rigged against the coal generators. My hon. Friend has delivered the review that many in the industry have long been asking for. Miners have also been demanding a challenge to the subsidies given by Germany to its coal industry. My hon. Friend has today told the House that he will challenge those subsidies to ensure that they are removed, as far as possible.

People in the coal industry and the coal communities have been asking the Government to invest in clean-coal technology; now my hon. Friend has stated that that is to be the policy of the Government. During the campaigns against the pit closures that were announced by the previous Government, and the campaigns to defend coal communities, people always mentioned the unfairness of coal having to compete with nuclear-generated electricity—they demanded action on that. Today, the Minister has told us that he will get rid of that anomaly. He said that nuclear-generated electricity will have to compete on equal terms with coal. As my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) said, we are not asking for favours for coal or for exemption from competition. Our miners and their industry and communities are merely asking to be allowed to compete on equal terms.

The Minister is to be commended for dealing promptly with the difficult legacy that he inherited and for coming up with practical policies and positive solutions.

There is a great deal of anger and frustration in the coalfields, where people feel let down. After today's statement by the Minister, many of those people will feel that, although they have not got everything they want, at least the Government are listening to them and allowing them to compete on equal terms, thereby protecting their jobs and communities.

6.33 pm

Mr. Battle: I thank all hon. Members who have joined in the debate. Although it is only a small, two-clause Bill, it concerns highly technical matters and our debate has been wide ranging. I do not use that term disparagingly; these are indeed complex matters. As someone told me recently, the energy questions that we face today will bring together the key questions of the 21st century. Hon. Members have tried to discuss them in all seriousness; over the short, the medium and the long term, we shall have to face these questions together.

The whole point of the Bill is to get ahead of the problem. On 31 March 1998, at the beginning of the next financial year, French nuclear power will lose the levy, as will the nuclear industry in England and Wales. That is why we needed to legislate in this Session. Once the other reviews are complete, we may need other legislative changes; they can be achieved in other Sessions.

The Government's energy policy is to provide a secure, sustainable and diverse supply of energy; that includes renewables and coal, combined heat and power, solar power and other forms of energy to which hon. Members have referred. We must also face up to the challenge of reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

The purpose of the Bill is to sort out the way in which the levy is raised and who should pay it. Contrary to the suggestions of Conservative Members, the Bill is not a tax-raising measure. Indeed, it will stop electricity prices rising because it will ensure that the nuclear energy

[Mr. Battle]

business continues to contribute to the levy. The Bill will actually force a minor reduction in prices. We want the inclusion of renewables; they need support, as fledgling industries and technologies, to be able to compete in the energy markets of the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) said that the fossil fuel levy was doing more to help the nuclear industry than renewables under the former Administration. The Bill will reverse that. He and others referred to clean-coal technology at Grimethorpe. The real tragedy is that the research was done there, but the technology was patented by the Swedish-Swiss company ABB; so we now have to buy back from abroad clean-coal technology that we invented in this country.

We need a levy on nuclear imports from France, because of the need for fair competition. We will also ensure that the levy on nuclear-generated electricity in Britain remains. The Bill will ensure that nuclear does not have an unfair advantage over other fuel sources, including coal.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) asked whether the scope of the levy will be broadened as a result of the reviews. I can only say that it is not the purpose of the Bill to do that, precisely because broadening the scope of the NFFO would need new legislation. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) mentioned that aspect, too.

Lord Ezra wanted the Bill to be expanded to include all combined heat and power schemes; others have entered bids for the inclusion of solar, photo-voltaics, hydrogen fuel cells and so on. We are looking into all those, but we had to conclude that it would be wrong to include them in the Bill. The House will in due course have an opportunity to discuss any proposals to widen the scope of the NFFO.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge also asked about a levy on pump storage. I acknowledge his point about double taxation, and we will certainly look into it.

I hope to have the findings of the renewables review in the coming two or three months. The utilities Green Paper is expected early in the new year. The review of electricity trading arrangements will be set up by Christmas under the Director General of Electricity Supply, and its conclusions will come in the first half of next year. These reviews are not in never-never land; they have definite timetables. We shall ensure that those timetables are stuck to.

The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge suggested that he was against the NFFO altogether. I had the impression that he was saying that we did not need it and should leave it to private companies. While we welcome Eastern's initiative in encouraging green electricity, we need to give the whole thing a boost, which was the whole point of the NFFO including at least an element of renewables. We are happy to take that up and push it much further.

There is some concern about extending the levy to include renewable sources of electricity outside the NFFO and Scottish renewables obligation arrangements. The arguments are balanced. Levy-free status for renewable electricity would give those generators an advantage, enabling them to charge higher prices, but some of those receiving the benefits may, in time, not need the special support and may be well able to compete by themselves. It may be better to target support raised through the levy on promising renewable projects, using technologies that are only just emerging and would repay such encouragement. If some of the renewables take off and become perfectly able to survive in the marketplace, why not use them to support the other sources?

Mr. Stunell: Will the Minister outline the criteria that he will use? When it comes to putting a levy on renewables, the crucial point is whether they can stand it and whether it affects their competitiveness and ability to expand.

Mr. Battle: That is the whole point. The purpose is to support and encourage renewables, which is why we are supporting the structure and have put forward the NFFO proposals. We intend simply to say that, at some time in the future, instead of coming back here to legislate, we may be able to do even more to support fledgling renewable technologies, some of which the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his speech.

In response to many of the points made by my hon. Friends tonight, the Government will continue, patiently and systematically, to attempt to clear up the mess left by the previous Government in the energy market. The previous Government decimated the coal industry. It is all right for the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) to say that the Conservative party wants a moratorium. The previous Government imposed a moratorium and then flogged off the whole industry—the electricity supply system and the generation and transmission system—leaving no levers behind for us to intervene as he now suggests.

Faced with that problem, we have taken strong action. We have blocked German coal subsidies within Europe; reviewed the electricity pool; ensured that generators offer any unwanted power stations to mining companies; and encouraged the regulator to prevent generators from passing on excessive costs on the early take-or-pay gas contracts. Tonight, we are removing any advantage that the nuclear industry and imported electricity would have had, and thus creating a level playing field.

I hope that this small but necessary Bill will be another step towards achieving our energy policy of secure, diverse and sustainable energy supplies. The levy is the main source of support for renewables generation, and the Bill will continue to ensure that the levy is soundly based. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Ministerial and Other Salaries Bill

6.42 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I beg to move,

That, in pursuance of the Parliament Act 1911, this House directs that the provisions of section 1(1) of that Act shall not apply to the Ministerial and Other Salaries Bill.

The motion is simple and straightforward. It directs that the provisions of section 1(1) of the Parliament Act 1911 should not apply to the Ministerial and Other Salaries Bill. The aim is to avoid any confusion that might otherwise arise because the House of Lords did not consider this money Bill within a month of receiving it.

Under section 1(1) of the Parliament Act 1911, if the Lords do not pass a money Bill within one month after receiving it from the Commons,

"the Bill shall, unless the House of Commons direct to the contrary, be presented to Her Majesty and become an Act of Parliament on the Royal Assent being signified, notwithstanding that the House of Lords have not consented to the Bill."

The Bill was received by the House of Lords on 24 July, but the Lords rose on 31 July without considering it. The allotted month therefore expired during the parliamentary recess. The Lords considered the Bill and passed it on 16 October. This motion will provide that, as the House of Lords has consented to the Bill, it is presented for Royal Assent in the normal way.

6.44 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): The Conservative party supports the measure and the House has already approved it. It has reappeared today because of a technicality in the House of Lords' handling of the matter, so it would be perverse in the extreme not to support today a measure which we supported in July.

I note that the Bill will not do away with the need to obtain parliamentary approval for special orders where a structural change is necessary. I also note that if it is necessary, at some time in the future, to change the formula that underlies the linking mechanism—after all, the motion is before us because there has been a change—Parliament will have to approve a new order setting out a replacement formula. Those are useful safeguards and we support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

NHS (Freedom of Speech)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Jane Kennedy.]*

6.45 pm

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): This is an extremely important subject. When I saw the statement by the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) on 25 September, committing himself and the new Labour Government to protecting the freedom of speech in the national health service, I felt that an important step had been taken. My hon. Friend made it clear that the issue could not be disconnected from an overall concern for openness and accountability in the conduct of public services, or from considerations about how NHS staff carried out their work, and the circumstances and constraints of their work.

In making that important commitment, the Government were also making it clear that they understood that questions of freedom of speech could not be disconnected from questions of practice, conduct and behaviour. Questions of freedom of speech could not, therefore, be disconnected from some of the unfortunate uncertainties of what constitute good practice and good conduct, as the case that I bring to the House's attention today illustrates all too clearly.

As I speak today, I bear in mind the words of Professor Liam Donaldson, now chief executive of the NHS regional executive in the Northern and Yorkshire region, who pointed out clearly some of the dilemmas facing doctors and medical staff when they seek to exercise their freedom of speech. He said:

"On many occasions I was told by those making the referral"—

or a complaint

"of their reluctance to report problems because they thought that nothing could or would be done, or because of the tendency in such cases for early involvement of defence societies and their lawyers. Moreover, whereas doctors' colleagues were often willing to report concerns confidentially and informally they were extremely reluctant to go on the record. Some considered that this would amount to disloyalty; others feared giving evidence in a hearing or believed that defamation actions would be launched against them."

Those, of course, are precisely the dilemmas faced by doctors in seeking to exercise their freedom of speech—which the Government rightly wish to defend—in the context of their practice.

This debate—which is less limited than I had envisaged—is about how doctors work and the standards to which they work. It involves the way in which doctors work with each other and the trust that patients place in them. Such trust is fundamental. The abuse of that trust, no matter how rarely it occurs, is always to be taken seriously. The principle of informed consent stands as a protection both for doctors and for their patients. It is to seek openness and accountability in the exercise of the principle of informed consent that I speak today.

My dilemma is that on the same day that my hon. Friend the Minister was issuing his statement, my constituent Mr. Sinha, a consultant gynaecological

[Mr. Jim Cousins]

oncologist—a cancer specialist—at Gateshead's Queen Elizabeth hospital was issued with an instruction by the chief executive of that hospital in the following terms:

"I must instruct you that you must not under any circumstances discuss issues regarding the GMC and"—

a consultant is named—

"with any patient."

That is an instruction without any condition or qualification.

Were my constituent Mr. Sinha to accept that instruction, he would be in breach of his duties under the British Medical Association guidance to doctors. I have on two occasions asked the chief executive of the Gateshead hospitals trust to explain what legal or contractual authority could possibly give rise to an instruction in such sweeping terms. I am still waiting for an answer.

Today's debate, therefore, is about freedom of speech. Let us not confuse freedom of speech with whistleblowing. A whistleblower can leak and can spin. A person seeking to exercise his freedom of speech does neither. Such a person doggedly pursue his rights, responsibilities and duties through the procedures and under the guidance that he comes across, in trying to carry out his duty as he sees it. Such people may be awkward, persistent, inconvenient and sometimes difficult to handle, but that is the nature of those who pursue freedom of speech. Those who seek to leak and to spin are under no such limitations.

I am in a peculiar position tonight, as there has been a great deal of press speculation and, I understand, a press release this afternoon from the NHS regional executive, which speculates about this debate. In the light of that press speculation—although I admit that I do not have the precise text of the NHS executive press release, as the executive did not elect to send it to me—I am forced to name the doctors and the hospital involved.

There are, in my view, matters that need further inquiry, but I shall contain those matters and any concerns that may arise from them within the narrowest grounds. For that reason, and that reason alone, I am obliged to name the two consultants concerned and the hospital.

My constituent Mr. Sinha is a consultant gynaecologist at Gateshead's Queen Elizabeth hospital. That hospital is a regional specialist centre for gynaecological cancer. Until the hospital trust was set up, it was run by the regional health authority.

My constituent has approached me under the terms of circular EL/93/51, which my hon. Friend the Minister put at the heart of his statement on 25 September, and correctly so. I make it clear to the House that my constituent has, in my view, rigorously, scrupulously and at all times in his dealings with me observed the terms of circular EL/93/51.

The length of time that it takes to pursue issues is a major limitation on the exercise of freedom of speech. Almost 10 years ago, my constituent, Mr. Sinha, first made known to the regional health authority—at that time, his employer—his concerns about the practices of a fellow consultant, Mr. John Monaghan. The response of the regional health authority at that time was to treat the issue as a matter of personal or perhaps professional politics. I use the term "politics" not in the sense in which we use it in the Chamber, but to mean the conduct of affairs.

After two years, the regional health authority carried out an inquiry into those matters. The results of that inquiry led to recommendations, one of which was that Mr. Monaghan should cease reporting his own pathology as a gynaecological expert. That was put into force in 1991. The other recommendation—that there should be central records and file keeping in that unit—was not put into force.

From that point, a remarkable set of arrangements has existed in the unit, which was put into place by Professor Donaldson and the regional health authority. I say that the arrangements are remarkable; I hope that they are also unique and that they will not continue much longer. Part of my purpose in raising the matter today is to ensure that those extraordinary arrangements are brought to an end at the earliest opportunity.

The arrangements involve the department being effectively split between my constituent Mr. Sinha and Mr. John Monaghan—there was at that stage no third consultant—with each consultant being responsible for his own case notes. One set of notes was held in the hospital's central records, and the other was not. It was an extraordinary arrangement. It was full of risks to good, sound patient care. Those risks exist because of the need to consult records, potentially on a daily basis.

That arrangement was put into place by the then regional health authority and it still exists. It served only to institutionalise, not to resolve, the distrust and conflict that gave rise to it.

Professor Donaldson has written in articles about the difficulties of resolving disputes between doctors and the necessity to act decisively and to see matters through to a conclusion. The arrangements that were set in place in Gateshead's Queen Elizabeth hospital could not conceivably be described in those terms and gave rise to constant difficulty which put patient care at risk.

I should note also that my constituent Mr. Sinha had raised with the regional health authority—his employer—an incident of physical conflict in an operating theatre. Professor Donaldson asked my constituent in writing not to refer that incident to the inquiry that was then going on and assured him that it would be the subject of a separate inquiry. That has not occurred. I hope that when the Minister investigates these difficult matters—as I hope that he will—he will address the possibility of racism. That should give rise to considerable concern.

My constituent persisted with the substance of his inquiries, but it was a further four years before they were investigated by an outside party, Mr. Michael Brudenell. Mr. Brudenell's report on the complaints made resulted in the following rather uncertain conclusion. He wrote:

"My own feeling is that there is not a prime facie case against Mr. Monaghan although he clearly chose to ignore accepted practice in the management of Mrs. A and Mrs. B."

He continued:

"I cannot find any evidence in the notes that Mrs. B had a preliminary biopsy although your letter"—

he wrote to the regional medical director, Dr. Hill—

"implies that she had."

He went on:

"Accepted practice is hard to define precisely and I suspect that if the complaint was argued out in the disciplinary hearing, experts would be found who would think that Mr. Monaghan was justified in acting as he did."

He then referred to the possibility of adverse publicity.

The fact that Mr. Monaghan chose twice to ignore accepted practice in the management of patients is serious. As a result of that disregard of accepted practice, two women underwent radical vulvectomies—in one case with dissection of the groin nodes and in the other with deep node dissection. Those are very serious and radical surgical procedures.

In making his conclusions known, Mr. Brudenell gave consideration to adverse publicity. I am not convinced—I invite the Minister to consider the matter carefully—that adverse publicity is a proper consideration in such matters. However, I note that, at precisely the same time as this matter was under report, the trust and the unit were associated with adverse publicity regarding a problem with cervical cancer screening.

This involved a local GP's method of taking cervical smears—I hope that it was an entirely novel technique which will never be repeated—which was supported by Mr. Monaghan. I discovered this while pursuing the concerns of some female constituents.

The ultimate report turned up an extraordinary letter written by Mr. Monaghan and addressed to "To whom it may concern". In that letter, Mr. Monaghan endorsed the high quality of the practice, and said:

"He"—

the GP whom I do not propose to name—

"does not routinely use a speculum"—

to carry out cervical smears—

"as he finds that many of his patients being lower socio economic group object."

That was a "To whom it may concern" letter. There was no doubt about Mr. Monaghan's endorsement of the practice on the basis that some patients were from a lower socio-economic group. That would appear prime facie to be a breach of the guidance to doctors that their practice must at no time be guided by issues such as the socio-economic group of the patients they treat. It is a matter of record that the issue was put before the General Medical Council, and we are still waiting for a resolution. The Brudenell report also states:

"if the complaint were argued out in the disciplinary hearing, experts would be found who would think that Mr. Monaghan was justified".

I was astonished to read that conclusion. If a doctor "chose"—that is the word used in the Brudenell report's conclusions—to ignore accepted practice, how could other people be found to endorse his actions? It is here that we come up against one of the real difficulties faced by those who seek to exercise freedom of speech in the NHS: when they try to exercise that freedom, they discover that the ground rules that they thought they were following are very insecurely based, and they are therefore left vulnerable to attack.

I find extraordinary the claim that others might be found to endorse this inadequate practice. I pursued the matter with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. My correspondence began with Mr. Geoffrey Chamberlain and, fortunately, moved on rapidly to Mr. K. R. Peel, the then senior vice-president of the college. In his letter to me, he wrote:

"I have today checked on a number of standard texts which deal with the subject and the titles of which are listed below. All clearly state that vulval cancer should be confirmed by biopsy prior to surgical treatment. Whilst the College Council have not discussed this topic, on a personal basis I would not do a radical vulvectomy and groin node dissection operation without histological confirmation of the cancer."

Subsequently, the council of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists was not willing to go quite that far. I have persisted with my inquiries with the college, as has my constituent Mr. Sinha, as one of its members, seeking to discover in what circumstances there could be exceptions to such guidance. No clear explanation has ever been given, but the college wants that option. The House can imagine my utter astonishment when I discovered that one of the sources who says that in all circumstances biopsy procedures should be carried out was none other than Mr. Monaghan himself. What are we to make of that? He writes articles in which he says that particular procedures are required and then in his own practice chooses to ignore them.

These are very serious matters. As a result of my subsequent correspondence with the regional health authority, I have very good grounds for believing that Mr. Sinha's concerns were well founded. There has been a serious breach of good practice. That cannot be disputed. The possibility exists that both women were damaged and subsequently deceived. The regional health authority was never able to assure me that either of them had conditions that warranted their undergoing the very serious procedures that were carried out by Mr. Monaghan.

By September 1994, these two cases, with others, had reached the General Medical Council. Once the procedures were exhausted with the regional health authority, my constituent moved immediately and correctly to place this matter before the GMC, but it was not until April 1997—nearly 10 years after these matters had first been raised with the regional health authority—that the GMC reached any conclusion. Then it chose to investigate just one of the two cases. It chose not to investigate a variety of other cases that were placed before it by Mr. Sinha where alteration of case notes was involved.

This is an important issue. How much, before and after their procedures, did these two women know about what had happened to them? The GMC has maintained throughout that informed consent, which is the benchmark protection for patients and doctors, is not a matter for it, and that it is a matter for legal procedure; but there is no law on informed consent. The legal procedures involve, perhaps, the police, perhaps charges of criminal assault. These are very serious and extreme measures. They are not measures which a doctor carrying out his work will readily or properly wish to explore, although he may have them as an ultimate option.

The GMC maintains that informed consent, which lay at the heart of this, was not something which it could investigate. If the women do not know what has happened to them, their ability to make their own inquiries and engage in whatever course of action seems correct to them and their relatives under the circumstances does not exist. The GMC chose to consider just one case—in which the

[Mr. Jim Cousins]

patient has died—but what of the woman who is still alive? The GMC said that it could not come between the woman and her consultant, Mr. Monaghan. That was a further serious indication to me that the patient had not been informed and that she may well have been entirely ignorant of the damage that could have been done to her.

For me, there is now an additional complication in all this; an extraordinary twist in the affair that wholly breaches all the guidance and procedures and is an extraordinary act of negligence on behalf of Dr. Hill of the regional health authority. In the course of our correspondence, meetings and exchanges, he made available to me in writing—I did not request it, and I would far rather be here tonight not knowing—the name of the patient who is still alive. That should never have been disclosed. That—if only that—should become a matter of serious inquiry. In revealing the name to me, Dr. Hill has made my position tonight almost impossible and untenable, as it has been for many months.

The situation is, then, that two women have not been operated on according to good practice. There is the likelihood of severe after effects from the procedures that were carried out. It appears, from the conclusions of the GMC, that no one other than Mr. Monaghan himself had the right or duty to tell the women. These are extraordinary affairs. The GMC decided, on the basis of the one case that it examined, to offer guidance to Mr. Monaghan on his future practice and to seek clarification from him about what the nature of his practice would be. Clearly that was sensible. My constituent Mr. Sinha has been vindicated. The GMC had, in effect, held up a yellow card, as it offered advice on future conduct.

However, the number of inquiries and the extraordinary length of time involved have seriously compromised my constituent's position. As far as I know, the situation that existed at the hospital still exists at this moment—he has no access to Mr. Monaghan's files; nor Mr. Monaghan to his. It is extraordinary that a doctor can be required to offer cover for another doctor without there being a central filing system to which all those who are properly entitled have access.

My constituent has been subjected to disciplinary procedures. We now come to the last difficulty about freedom of speech in the NHS—the nature of the NHS's internal procedures under the guidance issued by the previous Government, HC90(9). Under those procedures, there is an entirely inadequate distinction between professional and personal conduct. The lack of clarity about what is personal and what is professional seriously undermines the ability of people, such as my constituent Mr. Sinha, to speak out. The present situation is that using the disciplinary procedure on the basis of personal misconduct means that there can be summary dismissal. In that event, there is no recourse to the Secretary of State.

Personal misconduct, as defined by Professor Donaldson—the professor's explanations, which we constantly come across, cover this point, too—can relate only to a limited number of acts such as sexual harassment, fraud and false expenses claims. There can be no doubt that the charges against my constituent Mr. Sinha, brought against him by the trust—relating to an extraordinary working environment that was laid in place by the regional health authority—do not fall into that category.

There is a need to review the procedures so that we are clearer about what is properly personal and what is properly professional. We need to find a method of adjudicating clearly at an early stage in all proceedings the nature of the particular matter that is under investigation.

The matters that I have described are complex and, in a sense, individual, but they raise some general and fundamental questions that are important for the House. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to seek to get the General Medical Council to clarify the issues involved in informed consent. The GMC is moving on from the position that it struck when dealing with my constituent precisely to begin considering the issue of informed consent. I invite my hon. Friend to go further and to encourage it to go further and lay down some guidelines so that, in future, people faced with problems such as those confronting Mr. Sinha do not face similar uncertainty about the procedures involved.

I ask my hon. Friend the Minister also to review the dismissal procedures that the previous Government put in force, so as to safeguard rights being exercised in the specific context that I have described—against instructions such as the one with which Mr. Sinha is faced, which lead to a command of total silence on a range of subjects that he has been pursuing for many years. Rights in those circumstances should be safeguarded.

I ask my hon. Friend also to provide some guidance on a patient's right to know in matters where consent to treatment is given or could be given without his or her being made fully aware of what is involved in the absence of the necessary confirming procedures, prior to the patient being invited to undergo radical courses of surgical treatment.

I invite the Minister to set up an inquiry into the management and practice of the gynaecology department of the Queen Elizabeth hospital at Gateshead to review its present organisation and practices and to review past cases to ensure that the highest standards that are associated with the department's historic links to Sir Stanley Way, a major pioneer in the treatment of women, are continued and maintained. As a matter of urgency, a central record system should be established that does not put patient care at risk in the way that the present articulated system of record keeping does.

I apologise to the House for taking so much time over this matter, but it is one which I have wrestled with for some time. The Government's existence is a proud matter for all of us who sit on the Government Benches; freedom of speech in these circumstances, even when one is being difficult or might be represented as being difficult, is seriously put to the test. The accountability, transparency and honesty which freedom of speech involves are matters to which my hon. Friend the Minister referred in his statement of 25 September, which is a benchmark of progress and good practice in these matters. I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that the Government are committed to examining the possibility of malpractice and of seeking the highest possible standards that patients—in this instance, women—are entitled to expect. If only two women are involved, that is two women too many.

My constituent Mr. Sinha, in raising these issues—awkward, difficult, complex and fundamental though they are—has always adopted formal procedures in dealing

with professional bodies. He has persistently raised them with regulatory bodies. He has never dealt with the media. He has never engaged in leaking or spinning. The issues that he has pursued for so many years, however awkward and inconvenient he may sometimes have appeared to be, were raised in the course of his duty as a doctor, in a direction and to a direction that we would expect those with the care of ourselves to observe.

7.27 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) on securing the debate. He has raised some extremely important issues about freedom of speech within the national health service in the context of particular and serious concerns in the area that he represents. I shall address these issues immediately and state unequivocally the Government's support for freedom of speech within the NHS. I hope that the House will understand that I cannot discuss confidential clinical decisions relating to individual patients or detailed individual decisions affecting the employment of NHS staff. It would not be right or proper for me to do so.

The specific issues that my hon. Friend has raised in relation to Gateshead have a long history and are highly complex. The fact that they have not been satisfactorily resolved is clearly a matter of concern. It would not be right for me, however, to deal with the rights and wrongs of individual cases here and now. Such matters warrant proper investigation. If my hon. Friend writes to me setting out the details of his concerns, I shall look into them and ensure that he receives the fullest possible reply. I hope that this approach will provide my hon. Friend with the reassurance that he needs.

The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), in whose constituency the hospital lies, is unable to be in the Chamber this evening because of ministerial business. However, she takes a keen interest in the Queen Elizabeth hospital, which enjoys the active support of her constituency. I am able to give my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central the assurance that we are actively considering what further guidance on disciplinary procedures is needed to supplement HC(90)9. As he is aware, the current arrangements were introduced by the previous Government, even before the advent of NHS trusts. At its simplest, some of the advice refers to grades that no longer exist.

My hon. Friend also pointed to difficulties in the law on consent. A particular difficulty may be that, although the expression is in common use, the often-quoted concept of "informed consent" does not exist in the law of England. The courts remain the ultimate arbiters of what constitutes consent.

It is important that patients give valid consent or refusal To be valid, consent must be based on sufficient information to enable the patient to make a decision, and must be freely given. In general, all adult patients have the right under common law to give or withhold consent prior to medical examination or treatment. They are entitled to receive sufficient information, in a form that they can understand, to help them to make a decision.

The NHS Executive issued guidance in 1990: "A guide to consent for examination or treatment". That guidance makes it clear what the patient's rights are, what the duties of the doctor or other health professionals are, and how consent should be obtained. A doctor treating a patient without obtaining valid consent may be liable to a charge of assault.

I want to make it absolutely clear that there can be no justification for an employer penalising staff who speak out about genuine concerns. That is why we have outlawed in NHS contracts gagging clauses that are intended to conceal from legitimate public scrutiny information that the public have every right to know. I have done that in advance of the wider statutory protection in the Public Interest Disclosure Bill, because I believe that unless NHS staff have the right to speak their mind, patients will never get the health services that they need. These measures clearly outlaw any attempt by any NHS employer to impose contractual codes of silence on their staff to protect wrongdoing.

The NHS chief executive has also assured the Public Accounts Committee that such clauses have no place in the NHS. Perhaps nowhere in our public service is the freedom for staff to speak out more important than it is in the health service, which, with its almost 1 million staff, is the largest employer in Europe, and in which almost all of us place our trust at some point in our lives. In an organisation of that size, complexity and importance, genuine staff concerns arise. Because so many of us place so much faith and trust in the service, it is critical that such concerns are properly and thoroughly addressed.

Monday's statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health on breast screening services at the Royal Devon and Exeter trust, and cervical screening services at the Kent and Canterbury hospital trust, was a salutary reminder of what can happen when poor practice is not adequately challenged and exposed. Behind a wall of silence bad practice thrives. Minor problems fester and grow. Those who suffer when bad practice remains concealed are the patients who use services, the public who pay for them, the staff who have to tolerate the intolerable at work, and, let us not forget, the employer who will, at the very least, suffer waste and inefficiency.

For that reason, staff must be readily able to raise issues with their line managers and, where necessary, with the most senior levels of their organisations directly and, on occasions, publicly. Staff have sometimes raised issues in public and, in so doing, have provided an important safeguard for the public. It is essential that they act professionally and responsibly. Local management arrangements should be in place so that staff can raise concerns privately before that is ever an issue.

As my hon. Friend rightly said, I reinforced the five messages that are contained in the current guidance to the NHS on relations with the public and media when I wrote to chairs of NHS trusts and health authorities on 25 September. First, the NHS exists to meet the needs of patients, which must be paramount. Individual members of staff have a right and a duty to raise with their employer any concerns that they may have about the delivery of care or health services to a patient or client in their authority, trust or unit. If patients or clients are detained under the Mental Health Act 1983, staff may also raise concerns with the Mental Health Act Commission.

Secondly, every manager in the NHS has a duty to ensure that staff are easily able to express their concerns through all levels of management to the employing

[Mr. Alan Milburn]

authority or trust. Managers must ensure that any staff concerns are dealt with thoroughly and fairly. Thirdly, NHS employers should ensure that local policies and procedures are introduced to allow those rights and duties to be fully and properly met.

Fourthly, staff in the NHS have an obligation to safeguard all confidential information, particularly about individual patients or clients. Such information is, under all circumstances, strictly confidential, even if staff believe that disclosure is in the patient's interest.

Fifthly, under no circumstances will employees who express their views in accordance with this existing guidance be penalised for doing so. That does not justify disclosure that is not in the public interest. For example, malicious or frivolous disclosure is never justified. The guidance is clear that if, having exhausted local procedures, including reference to the chair of the employing body, employees are contemplating public disclosure, they are advised to seek professional advice to ensure that there is a soundly based case that disclosure is in the public interest.

The new guidance that I have issued to NHS employers enshrines freedom of speech for health service staff. They should be able to raise issues of concern in a responsible manner, without compromising patient confidentiality and without fear of victimisation.

Similarly, I have told NHS employers that racism has no part to play in a modern national health service. My hon. Friend alluded to allegations of racism surrounding this sorry case. I told health care human resource managers in September that I want them to identify racism wherever it is and act to stamp it out. Staff must know that they will be vigorously supported if they are discriminated against, and those who practise racism in the national health service must learn to expect zero tolerance.

More generally, as my hon Friend may know, the Government support the Public Interest Disclosure Bill presented by the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd), which would protect those who express genuine concerns about victimisation. The Government are also committed to a freedom of information Act, which was a key manifesto pledge and is central to our programme to modernise and reform government. It will bring about a sea change, so that, instead of public bodies having the final say on what information is provided, people will have a statutory right to information. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that that is an important shift in the relationship between government and governed. It is long overdue in a mature democracy.

My hon. Friend has raised a welter of serious concerns. I promise that I shall investigate them thoroughly. I have taken note of what he said, but I will examine the record closely. I repeat to my hon. Friend the invitation to write to me with further concerns, if he has them, and I give him an assurance that there will be a full and detailed investigation and a full and detailed reply to the anxieties that he has expressed.

More generally, as my hon. Friend knows, Government bodies are answerable to the House for the proper use of their resources and the way in which they conduct themselves. It is intolerable that bad practice should continue. The Government are committed to ensuring that NHS staff have the mechanisms to identify and question bad practice and that, where necessary, they also have the right to raise issues such as this publicly, without victimisation. That right should be incorporated in law. We are also committed to exposing issues of concern by ensuring that both health authority and hospital trust board meetings take place in public and by ensuring that the current codes of practice on openness are replaced by a statutory right to information.

It would be wrong to pretend that bad practice can ever be completely eliminated in any large organisation, but I believe that maximum exposure of the workings of the NHS to public scrutiny is the key to identifying and overcoming the problems that sometimes arise.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at nineteen minutes to Eight o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 6 November 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** What plans he has for speeding up reforms to the common agricultural policy. [12609]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Dr. John Cunningham): I expect the Commission to propose detailed CAP reforms early next year. Making progress on discussion of those reforms will be a priority for the UK presidency of the Agriculture Council.

Mr. O'Brien: It is pleasing to note that from 1 January next year the EU presidency will be with the Labour Government. As one of the EU's objectives is to help small farms, will my right hon. Friend make every endeavour to ensure that the UK's large farms do not suffer under any CAP reforms? Will he also make every endeavour to assure us that the benefits of any CAP review will be felt by UK customers in the form of lower food prices?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend assurance on both those points. First, I would not support any form of modulation which discriminated against the UK or our efficient farmers. There are arguments for reducing expenditure on the CAP, but the argument that expenditure should be targeted at less efficient farming does not appeal to me. As for directing the benefits of any change towards consumers, I can assure my hon. Friend that we expect consumers to benefit quite significantly from changes to the cereals, beef, and—if we could achieve them—the milk regime too.

Mr. Walter: The Commission's proposals for reform of the CAP are outlined in Agenda 2000, but does the Minister agree that they make little concession towards enlargement of the EU, that they are probably unacceptable to the World Trade Organisation and that the financial outcome will be that they cost the taxpayer more rather than less?

Dr. Cunningham: I can partially agree with the hon. Gentleman. Some of the proposals will help us to conform with the likely requirements of the next round of WTO talks, and some will help us to develop a successful enlargement of the EU, which is the policy of Her Majesty's Government, but proposing that milk quotas should continue until 2006 will not help us to achieve either of those two objectives.

Mr. Blizzard: When considering the effects of European policy on British agriculture, farmers in my constituency are rather keen on the single European currency. Was not the Chancellor's statement on the euro last week in the best interests of British agriculture, while the stance taken by the Leader of the Opposition does a disservice to farmers and shows that the Opposition are completely out of touch with the countryside?

Dr. Cunningham: Exactly so—for a party which claims to be in touch with what is happening in the agriculture and food industries to suppose that that is not the case just shows how out of touch with reality it really is.

Mr. Charles Kennedy: Will the Minister acknowledge that one of the potential benefits that can accrue to the United Kingdom through the coincidence of his custodianship of the Council of Ministers in the first half of next year and the CAP reform agenda is that he will be in a position to resist the understandable political temptation to speed up reform and, if he judges it correctly from a British as well as a wider European interest, he can ensure that time is taken to get the matter right, not least in the light of the implications that were acknowledged by the hon. Member for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard)?

In that context, given the uncertainty against which UK agriculture is operating with the agenda before us, will he take this opportunity to clarify or amplify the remarks made in the Chamber earlier in the week during the rural affairs debate as to the immediate, early, specific and targeted steps that he can take to alleviate some of the income difficulties being experienced, particularly in the less favoured areas, with regard to hill livestock compensatory allowances?

Dr. Cunningham: There were several questions there.

I broadly support the proposals for agricultural reform in Agenda 2000. As I have said before, some of them do not go far enough for me, but we must be realistic about the coalition for change that it is possible to build in the Agriculture Council.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) has said that £200 million is available to me because of an underspend on sheep annual premium, but that is not the case. If that money were available to me at no cost to the United Kingdom taxpayer, there would be no sensible reason for me not to take it. It is not available.

I recognise that the real problem on the hills at the moment is in the beef sector, given that last year sheep producers had a record year for the price of their lambs. This year, beef producers will benefit directly from £450 million of support. In addition, over the next couple of years we shall spend £2 billion dealing with the consequences of BSE. I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has not made any unrealistic demands for cash, but I put it to him that there is a limit to how much the taxpayer can spend on these problems. The answer is to restructure the beef sector.

Mr. Jack: May I take the right hon. Gentleman back to the answer that he has just given, in which he dismissed

the claim that I made in the debate on Tuesday that there was an underspend on the sheep annual premium? Will he confirm that he has received advice that there is an underspend on that budget? Will he also confirm that, in the light of that underspend, if he were to maintain the current levels of spending on hill livestock compensatory allowances, he would not breach his Department's public expenditure survey limits, which have already been set? If he cannot defend the interests of hill farmers—who are some of the hardest pressed farmers in this country—by giving me a positive answer, will he confirm that the truth of the matter is that the Treasury already has the money?

Dr. Cunningham: The truth of the matter is that that was the same rubbish that we heard from the right hon. Gentleman on Tuesday evening. I can confirm that the sheep annual premium is a demand-led scheme and is fully funded by the European Community. We make estimates of expenditure under the scheme, but there is no specific provision for that. To suggest that, because there may be less in sheep annual premium this year than last year, the difference is available to me to use for hill livestock compensatory allowances is absurd nonsense. If the right hon. Gentleman does not know that, let me tell him that hill farmers know it and they know that he is bogusly trying to raise a scare.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: The Minister referred to the priority that he is giving to reform of the common agricultural policy. Will he enlighten us on the ways in which that reform could take place? Does he acknowledge that one way would be to reduce headage payments and to spend more money on agri-environmental schemes? Are the Government of the view that that is one way forward?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. That is one of the positive opportunities for reform that we should grasp. We should decouple CAP expenditure from production. I should like to see reductions in support—with, I emphasise, transitional support for farmers—so that we move towards market prices for commodities. We should transfer some of those resources into agri-environment schemes and into rural economies generally.

It is obvious that expenditure on agriculture and farming alone will never solve the problems of rural areas, the uplands or anywhere else. We must take other measures. It is also obvious that the policies pursued by the previous Administration for 18 years, far from solving the problems of rural areas and uplands, made them worse. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need new policies: he is absolutely right.

Meat Hygiene Service

2. **Mr. Michael J. Foster:** What steps he is taking to improve the performance of the Meat Hygiene Service. [12610]

Dr. John Cunningham: My first priority is to safeguard the health and well being of consumers, and the Meat Hygiene Service is in absolutely no doubt of that.

Mr. Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. What steps does he intend to take to raise consumer confidence in standards of hygiene in slaughterhouses, and when does he intend to publish individual hygiene scores?

Dr. Cunningham: We have taken a significant number of steps to improve consumer confidence in the hygiene and safety of meat in general and beef in particular. We shall publish individual hygiene assessment scores from January next year. We have taken action to remove dirty livestock from the food chain; contaminated carcases must never be passed as fit for human consumption; we are providing additional training for Meat Hygiene Service staff; we have stepped up attendance at plants, particularly those with low hygiene scores; and we have given a wider role to principal official veterinary surgeons as circuit supervisors of plant-based hygiene and inspection teams. In those and other ways, we are concentrating and focusing on driving up hygiene standards in the meat industry.

Mr. Greenway: Does the Minister agree that the establishment of the Meat Hygiene Service in York—in conjunction with the Central Science Laboratory at Sand Hutton in my constituency—has been an outstanding success? Will he take this opportunity to say that the jobs and prospects of staff at both establishments will be protected when he creates his Food Standards Agency?

Dr. Cunningham: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The last Administration's decision to establish the Meat Hygiene Service was a good one. It has worked: it has improved the efficiency of the system. *[Interruption.]* I am saying that it was a good idea. It is rather churlish of the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) to protest when I am agreeing with one decision made by his Administration. I am telling his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) that the service has improved efficiency and is an excellent feature of our determination to drive up hygiene standards. It has an assured future: responsibility for it will pass to the Food Standards Agency, and we have no intention of moving it from York.

Food Safety

3. **Mr. Bradshaw:** What measures the Government are taking to ensure that the British public have confidence in his Department's statements about food safety. [12611]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): Our clear priority is to put food safety first. We are looking towards the creation of an independent Food Standards Agency, which was a clear manifesto commitment, and we shall publish a White Paper very soon.

Mr. Bradshaw: Does my hon. Friend share my great concern that consumer confidence in this country will be severely shaken if the World Trade Organisation succeeds in its current attempt to overthrow the European Union ban on imports of beef from America containing hormones that we all know cause cancer? Will he assure the House that he will join his colleagues in the European Union to fight the World Trade Organisation and the Americans tooth and nail?

Mr. Rooker: The World Trade Organisation rules allow Governments to choose the appropriate level of

protection for their citizens, which is absolutely right. What they do not allow are restrictions on trade which are not scientifically justified or are in themselves discriminatory. The hormones case is still going through the disputes procedure. We shall be looking for an outcome that protects consumers and their rights while respecting the sound scientific principles on which the WTO rules are based, without which there would be international chaos.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister confirm that public health safety will be the primary object of the new food safety organisation, and that it will have its primary remit in the best scientific evidence that is available at the time?

Mr. Rooker: The answer to both questions is yes.

Mr. Dawson: Is my hon. Friend aware of the E. coli outbreak in my constituency of Lancaster and Wyre? The victims have fortunately recovered, and the firm involved has been completely exonerated and has operated in a very responsible manner. It seems that the problem related to the use of unpasteurised milk. Will my hon. Friend give some consideration to future policy regarding the use of unpasteurised milk in cheese-making?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, I am aware of the recent outbreak in my hon. Friend's constituency. The outbreak control team met this morning. It has carried out a risk assessment of the factory and its products and has decided that there is no justification for extending the action taken in respect of unpasteurised milk cheese to other cheeses produced by that factory. Officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and from the Department of Health left for Lancashire this morning and should arrive there by early afternoon, although they are not part of the outbreak control team. I am moving to bring English policy on the drinking of raw, unpasteurised milk into line with that which has been in place in Scotland for many years, but I have no plans to do that in respect of cheese.

Mrs. Ewing: Has the Minister had an opportunity to read the *Official Report* of yesterday afternoon's Committee proceedings on the Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) Order? We looked carefully at the issue of fish safety and people's attitude to health issues relating to its consumption. Is the Minister aware that 293 square miles of the Moray firth have been banned to fishermen and that this dates from the first report of oil pollution on 28 August? At one point, it was 150 tonnes. It was then downgraded to 100 tonnes and subsequently moved up to 685 tonnes of oil pollution. It is sad that, in yesterday's Committee debate, the Government showed little sense of reality on the question of how to deal with long-term issues affecting co-operation by the oil and fishing industries to ensure that both industries are safe.

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Lady raises an important point which was not dealt with by the Ministry at yesterday's meeting of the Committee. Nevertheless, I am aware of the general issues that she rightly raises and I will write to her on the detailed points.

Battery Hens

4. **Ann Clwyd:** What steps he is taking to further the welfare of battery hens. [12612]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The welfare of laying hens is a matter of concern which needs to be resolved at EU level. This is why we are pressing the Commission to bring forward proposals to amend the current controls. We expect these amendments to recognise the need to plan the long-term phasing out of the conventional battery system.

Ann Clwyd: I am sure that I do not need to remind my hon. Friend, with his commitment to animal welfare, of the cruel conditions in which battery hens live. They are unable to stretch their wings, to peck or to scratch, and they are not even able to make nests in which to lay their eggs. What action does he intend to take on the Farm Animal Welfare Council report, which calls for the phasing out of battery cages and for further research on alternatives to that very cruel method of raising hens?

Mr. Morley: The Government have welcomed the report by the Farm Animal Welfare Council on laying hens. We are also commissioning research into supporting alternative systems and dealing with the welfare problems of each system. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will address the issue during the UK presidency to seek improvements to battery systems in the short term.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Does the Minister agree that hon. Members in all parts of the House are interested in the welfare of animals and of battery hens in particular? Does he further agree that this must be a matter for the EU and that we must have a common standard throughout? Does he also agree that the answer to the welfare of hens in a battery system is down to good husbandry and that the number of eggs that are required in this country for catering and for private consumption cannot be supplied by free-range or barn systems? In addition, housewives cannot afford such eggs. Will he present a common-sense solution to the problem and ensure that, with good husbandry, the product can be afforded by the majority of Britain's families?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Lady is right to say that the issue must be approached on a Europe-wide basis; otherwise our producers would be undermined without welfare gain in relation to the eggs on shop shelves. Retailers such as Marks and Spencer have announced that they will no longer stock any eggs except those from free range systems. Undoubtedly consumer demand and quality assurance schemes from retailers are already driving change in that area.

Common Fisheries Policy

5. **Mr. Amess:** What recent representations he has received on the common fisheries policy. [12613]

Mr. Morley: I have received many recent representations on the common fisheries policy.

Mr. Amess: Will the Minister do all he possibly can to reverse the decline of the inshore fishery? Is he aware that

many fishermen in Leigh-on-Sea feel that sole and plaice quota has been lost to flag ships and that that imbalance has failed to be addressed by underpinning? Will he finally ensure that EC directive 2141/70 article 39(i) is adhered to, as it will help fishermen in Leigh-on-Sea and those people who eat the fish in Basildon?

Mr. Morley: The hon. Member makes a serious point about the pressures on the inshore fishing industry, and Ministers are committed to supporting that sector of the industry. I can give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that, in the discussions that, as he is aware, are taking place on a change towards fixed quota allocation the Government will ensure that the needs of the inshore industry are protected and recognised by continued underpinning of quota and, in relation to directive EC 2141/70, by support for the inshore industry through schemes such as PESCA and harbour grants. The industries in that area are eligible for such schemes. They can make an application, and of course we shall treat each application on its merits as part of our support for the fishing industry.

Mr. Andrew George: While I appreciate the efforts being made by the Minister at the recent meeting of European Ministers to ensure that the most humane methods are employed to prosecute various fisheries throughout Europe, will he recognise, as I do, that many fishermen have chosen to employ other methods which take them away from the quota system, and will he respond to requests that compensation be afforded to the very few tuna drift net fishermen who will be damaged by any measures to ban their fishery so as to assist them to retrain and invest in other forms of fishery and remain off quota?

Mr. Morley: At the Fisheries Council last week, I made it clear that, under the United Kingdom presidency, the British Government will progress with proposals which have been lying on the table since 1992 to phase out high seas drift nets in EU waters, especially because of the impact on dolphins and non-target species. I also said then that we realised that this would have an impact on those fishermen who are involved in that fishery, and of course their interests and needs will be taken into consideration. I have already received representations from Mike Townsend of the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, who has argued the interests of his members very strongly.

Mr. Jack: Will the Minister confirm that, due to the Prime Minister's failure in negotiating the Amsterdam treaty, that treaty contains no legal protection for British fishermen threatened as a result of quota hopping? Can he also confirm that what was negotiated in the form of an exchange of letters between Commission President Santer and the Prime Minister amounts in effect to nothing more than is already contained in category A licences as far as landings are concerned?

Can the Minister explain why, although he has been in conversation with the fishing industry since August about matters of enforcement and quota hopping, the industry is still waiting for a definitive statement of Government policy on these vital matters? Is that not a vivid illustration of the fact that his policy is a shambles?

Mr. Morley: The Conservative Government put forward totally bogus proposals to deal with quota hopping. They made proposals to try to deal with the issue in the intergovernmental conference, knowing that just one country could veto those proposals. Not only that, but not one other country supported the Government's position. We have made more progress to deal with quota hopping in six months than the Conservative Government made in their last decade in office. We shall make announcements about our policy on the fishing industry in due course, but we have been undertaking a proper consultation with the fishing industry to obtain its views and to involve it in decisions in a way that the previous Government failed to do.

Cattle Breeders

6. **Mr. Swayne:** What representations he has received from breeders of traditional native breeds of cattle with slow rates of growth. [12614]

Mr. Rooker: I have received a small number of representations from breeders of such animals.

Mr. Swayne: Is the Minister aware that ecologists agree that the best way to maintain the unique character of the New Forest is to have it grazed by suckler cows? Is he also aware that, because of the quality of the ground, such beasts will be in their third year before they can be sold as store? Will he therefore distance himself from the disgraceful remarks made by the Minister of Agriculture on Tuesday when he accused farmers of cheating on the schemes for compensation for BSE?

Mr. Rooker: I will attempt to address the hon. Gentleman's question of substance, because there is a genuine problem for breeders of native breeds of cattle with slow rates of growth such as Galloway, Welsh black and Highland. The beef assurance scheme was fixed up so that such cattle can come to market at between 30 and 42 months. I regret that there are only 73 registered members of that scheme, so it has not been a success. That does not meet the issues raised in the hon. Gentleman's supplementary question, but it meets those raised in his original question of substance.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend is completely right to say that it is a genuine problem. Will the Ministry take into account not only any romantic advantage of Highland or other special breeds but their value to the gene pool? Will the Ministry look at the issue from the point of view of long-term genetic advantage to the British cattle herd?

Mr. Rooker: I do not know how many of the 73 herds in the scheme are in Scotland, but my hon. Friend's point is correct. One of the reasons for the beef assurance scheme was to ensure that farmers with special breeds did not suffer and that the nation did not suffer by losing those breeds.

Mr. Paice: Does the Minister accept that the three breeds that he just cited are all hill breeds? Is it not absolute drivel for the Minister to suggest that the problems of hill farming are related purely to the beef ban? Does he not know or even care that the prices of fat cattle, store cattle and lambs are now much lower than they were 12 months ago, which was well after the ban was introduced? Does he not know that the prices of store

cattle and sheep are now lower than when he took responsibility for the industry? Is it not true that that is because of the Government's policy of keeping sterling so high, which is destroying our sheep exports and encouraging beef imports? What will he do now about the proposals to end the intervention for beef, which would only mean more imports into this country and even lower cattle prices for our native breeds and all others?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman seems to be under the illusion that we are not living in a market economy.

Diet and Nutrition

7. **Mr. Cousins:** What assessment he has made of variations in diet and nutrition between the regions of England; and what role the Food Standards Agency will have to investigate them. [12616]

Mr. Rooker: The Department assesses regional variations in the diet of the British population using the continuous national food survey and, with the Department of Health, the national diet and nutrition survey programme.

Mr. Cousins: Does the Minister agree that the consumption of fruit, vegetables and salad is lower in the northern region of England than in other parts of England? Does he agree that that is a matter not just of individual choice but of social exclusion from good diet because people find themselves on low incomes, with no cars and facing high-cost food? Will he assure the House that the Food Standards Agency will do some proactive work and contribute to the Government's policy on social exclusion so that diet is also considered when we talk about social exclusion?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is right to say that the consumption of certain foods varies on a regional basis. More up-to-date figures will be published on 10 November in the next national food survey. A special analysis of regional data is contained in that report.

On my hon. Friend's second point, the Food Standards Agency will play a key role in advising on nutrition and diet issues, working with the Department of Health. That will be made abundantly clear in the White Paper later this month.

Mr. Paterson: As there is a variation in the incidence of tuberculosis in badgers in the different regions of Britain, can the Minister say whether the Government have any policy on that matter? Farms have been closed—

Madam Speaker: Order. This question does not relate to badgers; it is about nutrition in the regions.

Mr. Tredinnick: Does the Minister accept that an important element in nutrition can be vitamin supplements? Is he aware of the dismay among many alternative and complementary medical practitioners and nutritionists about the ban on over-10 mg vitamin B6? Does he accept that, across the industry, most people believe that 100 mg is perfectly safe? Is not the advice that the hon. Gentleman has accepted fundamentally flawed, having been based on a 10-year-old survey largely dealing with animals? Much more recent information is now available. Will he reconsider the matter, which is causing much concern among those who are trying to improve the health of the nation?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman raises a legitimate point, but I invite him to re-read the further information that he has received—as, indeed, has every hon. Member. The advice was not taken on the basis of one scientific paper—more than 100 have been assessed.

The point that needs to be made abundantly clear to everyone, especially those outside the House, is that in respect of dietary supplements we are acting on the basis of food law. If people want to take them on health grounds, there is health law covering that, but I am not dealing with that.

Radioactive Material (Dumping At Sea)

8. **Mr. Hanson:** If he will make a statement on progress into investigations into the dumping of radioactive material at sea. [12617]

Mr. Rooker: The searches to identify any unrecognised dumping of radioactive waste at sea have now been completed, apart from those at the Ministry of Defence, where they are unlikely to be completed this year, I regret. Only one further instance of such dumping has been identified in addition to those I announced in July this year. This concerns the disposal of radioactive miss-distance indicators by the Royal Air Force in the Holyhead deep in 1974.

The details of that disposal have been passed to the National Radiological Protection Board and have been included in its independent assessment of all the disposals. I expect to receive the board's report and to announce its findings very shortly.

We have throughout kept fully informed all the territorial Departments of Government, as well as the Government of the Irish Republic.

Mr. Jack: That was a statement

Mr. Rooker: The question asked for a statement.

Mr. Hanson: I thank my hon. Friend both for his comments today and for his statement in July. That brought to light, for the first time, unacceptable practices undertaken under previous Governments to dump radioactive material at sea—including in Liverpool bay, off the north Wales coast, near my constituency.

Will my hon. Friend continue with open government and bring forward any relevant proposals? When the board's recommendations are made and the details are known, will he put them before the House so that we can understand what happened under previous Governments?

Mr. Rooker: The matter will be dealt with openly, and the report published.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: Is the Minister aware that radioactive contamination at sea also comes from nuclear establishments? Is he further aware that, as recently as

October, contamination from the Dounreay plant resulted in the closure of a nearby fishery, which, to my knowledge, is still closed?

Mr. Rooker: I am aware of that. One reason why that contamination was discovered was the constant surveillance of our seashore for contaminants. It is a crucial and continuing process. Action will be taken when contaminants are found.

Beef

9. **Mr. Pickthall:** If he will make a statement about the level of confidence of the British public in British beef. [12618]

10. **Mr. O'Hara:** What steps he is taking to improve confidence in British beef. [12619]

13. **Mr. Beith:** If he will make a statement about the current state of the beef sector. [12622]

Dr. John Cunningham: Numerous Government initiatives have helped to secure significant improvements in the beef consumption level, indicating a return of consumer confidence. However, the European beef sector remains in long-term structural surplus. The Government are pressing for fundamental reform of the EU beef regime through negotiations on the Commission's agenda 2000 proposals.

Mr. Pickthall: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Will he go on to tell us whether he detects greater confidence in British beef among our European partners, and how that confidence might be manifested in policy or regulation changes?

Dr. Cunningham: We have been working hard to re-establish confidence not only in British beef but in the British Government's contribution to open and constructive dialogue in the affairs of the European Union, the Commission, the Council of Ministers and the Parliament. Two of our proposals are now under consideration in Brussels to lift partially the ban on British beef. The first is the certified herd scheme, and the second is the date-based scheme. It will be for the various committees of the Brussels Commission to make decisions on those schemes. I keep urging them to press ahead, without further delay.

Mr. O'Hara: The over-30-months scheme is one of the measures that has contributed greatly to raising confidence in British beef, but it has many faults. Will the Minister conduct an investigation into the scheme's workings, with particular reference to geographical distribution of abattoirs in the scheme? Apart from the commercial implications of uneven and inequitable distribution of abattoirs, there is an animal welfare consideration. Cattle—particularly casualty cattle—are having to travel unnecessarily long distances to slaughter.

Dr. Cunningham: Administration of the scheme is dealt with by the Intervention Board executive agency. However, abattoirs have been chosen on the basis of competitive tender, hygiene performance and geographical location. I realise that the over-30-months scheme is not universally popular and that there are some problems with it—not least that it is one of the single most expensive schemes in which we are engaged in dealing with the BSE crisis. I will reflect on what my hon. Friends have to say. As I have made clear to the House, however, detailed administration of the scheme is a matter not for me but for the Intervention Board.

Mr. Beith: Does the Minister realise that beef farmers in Northumberland have had animals transported from Northumberland to Cornwall for slaughter under the scheme and also face those transport costs? Does he realise that those beef farmers are also facing continued competition from imported beef, which still does not have to meet the standards that we set for our own beef product? Today, he has already admitted that hill beef farmers are facing particular difficulties. Does he realise that those difficulties are relevant to his decisions about hill livestock compensatory allowances?

Dr. Cunningham: Yes, I recognise the first problem mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman, because he wrote to me about it. I said that I thought that that type of situation was clearly unsatisfactory, and that it should also be unnecessary.

As for beef imports, the House will recall that I made it clear both in the Chamber and in Brussels that, if the European Union Council of Ministers did not act to apply a uniform policy on removal of specified risk materials in beef across the entire European Union, I would act unilaterally to prevent imports from the European Union that had not been so treated into the United Kingdom. We were successful in winning on that issue in the negotiation by a single vote.

In July, however, I made it clear that it would be necessary for me to make a concession to win that vote. The concession was that implementation would take effect not on 1 October 1997—as it would have done had I acted unilaterally—but from 1 January 1998. That concession was necessary to win the argument in the Council by eight votes to seven.

I know that, for a very long time, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) has represented hundreds, if not thousands, of hill beef farmers. I have represented many such farmers, although for a slightly longer time. We both know the problems very well. I say again that, this year, there will be £450 million-worth of direct support for farmers in the beef sector, and that we are spending colossal sums in trying to resolve the problems that they face, particularly from BSE. The solution to the problem is not more subsidy, as Conservative Members seem to think, but to solve the problems that are of their creation—first, BSE—and of over-capacity in Europe's beef sector.

Mrs. Spelman: Given that red meat consumption has fallen by 25 per cent. in the past 20 years and yet, in the same period, the incidence of colon cancer has increased by 20 per cent., will the Minister explain why he has given his full support to the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy report which recommends a further reduction in red meat consumption? Is not that one more nail in the coffin of the United Kingdom's red meat industry, which is already in crisis?

Dr. Cunningham: The COMA report has not been published in full, so I advise the hon. Lady to wait and

see what it says. If the Government appoint independent scientific committees—the previous Government did the same—to assess risk to people in respect of health and other matters, those committees sometimes reach uncomfortable conclusions. There is no point in our wishing away those conclusions because that simply destroys the integrity and independence of such committees.

Mr. Nicholls: It is not going to be possible to restore confidence in British beef if there are no British beef producers left. Does the right hon. Gentleman not realise that his failure to match the previous Government's commitment to make a payment of £60 million—indeed, he intends to reduce it—has caused real fear and terror among hill farmers? Does he not understand that to sneer that hill farmers are one of the less efficient sectors of the British industry, as he did earlier in these exchanges, means that he is devastating a vital part of our agricultural community and, at the same time, making it abundantly clear that he has no idea of the role that hill farmers play, not only in British beef production as a whole but environmentally? Is it not about time that the right hon. Gentleman's deeds matched his rhetoric?

Dr. Cunningham: One abiding reason that the House can rarely, if ever, take the hon. Gentleman seriously is that he has only one mode, and that is always over the top. Given the location of his constituency and mine, I suspect that I have far more regular contact, and on a much wider basis, with hill farmers than he ever does. He asked why I have not matched in the coming year the previous Government's commitment to support for HLCAs—the answer is that I have. We are working on the same proposals as the previous Government.

ATTORNEY–GENERAL

The Attorney–General was asked—

Race Hatred

30. **Mr. Gapes:** How many prosecutions his office has sanctioned for incitement to racial hatred; and how many it has decided not to pursue in each year since 1990. [12640]

The Attorney–General (Mr. John Morris): Since 1990, 41 consents have been granted for prosecution of incitement to racial hatred under part III of the Public Order Act 1986. Five applications for consent have been refused and one has been withdrawn. I am arranging for a breakdown to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Gapes: I am grateful for that reply. Does the Attorney-General share the widespread concern felt by people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds about the dissemination of race-hate and anti-Semitic material, which is being widely distributed? Will he assure the House that the Government will do far more than their predecessors to act rigorously and with determination to take legal action against the producers of such material?

The Attorney–General: I can assure my hon. Friend that I will act vigorously to ensure that the behaviour that he describes, which I am sure the whole House regards as repulsive, is dealt with. I hope that the police will continue vigorously to investigate any allegations of incitement to racial hatred. Where such inquiries result in submission of a file to the Crown Prosecution Service and where there is sufficient evidence to prosecute, the public interest will almost invariably justify proceedings, and I will accordingly give my consent.

Mr. Burnett: The Government have announced their intention to provide extra penalties for a guilty party when racism is proved as a motivation for a crime. In order that the appropriate evidence may be gathered, what training resources and practice guidelines will be given to the police to secure a tangible result?

The Attorney–General: As the hon. Gentleman rightly says, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made proposals to introduce new offences of racial violence. In my professional experience, the Court of Appeal has long said that such matters should be taken into account by sentencing judges. I am sure that the enshrining of such matters in statute will be welcome. The primary duty to investigate such complaints lies with the police, who will approach the problem vigorously, although so far the majority of identification has, successfully, been in the hands of the CPS.

Mr. Grieve: In the first question to the Attorney-General, the suggestion was made that past Governments had been dilatory in prosecuting in racial hatred cases. Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman confirm that decisions on whether to prosecute are for the Crown Prosecution Service—ultimately, they are matters for the Attorney-General, but they are usually taken by the CPS—and involve no political input?

The Attorney–General: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the matter is a quasi-judicial function of my office. In the earlier years, from 1990, only two or three such consents were granted each year, but since 1995 there has been a rising curve, with seven in that year and numbers in double figures thereafter. Our best hope is that such matters will not arise, but if they do they will be approached quasi-judicially.

Lenient Sentences

31. **Mr. Flynn:** What plans he has to extend the period allowed for appeals against apparently lenient sentences. [12641]

The Attorney–General: The statutory time for an application for leave to refer a sentence to the Court of Appeal on the grounds of undue leniency is 28 days. That is mandatory and cannot be extended. That strict time limit was imposed to meet the concern that it would be intolerable if those whose sentences were subject to a procedure had to endure a long period of uncertainty about whether it would be used. Any consideration given to extending the time limit would need to take account of those concerns, as well as the practical implications of any other changes in the regime.

Mr. Flynn: The concerns of convicted murderers or other offenders obviously have to be taken into account,

but should we not also consider the anxiety and anger of the families of those who have suffered? I brought before the Attorney-General a murder case in which an apparently lenient sentence was given. The short period in which the processes have to be undertaken means that a decision often has to be made in the final hours of the final day. Is it not true that rushed judgments are often poor judgments?

The Attorney–General: I have explained why there has to be a balance. There was great concern when the proposal was first brought into operation. Time is short, as I am sure my predecessor would be the first to agree. There are often only days for consideration—perhaps only hours in some cases, although in only a few, I hope. However, the cases are considered in time. I hope that all hon. Members will do their best to disseminate the information that 28 days are available from sentence.

Crown Prosecution Service

33. **Mr. Yeo:** What are the current staffing levels of the Crown Prosecution Service; and if he will make a statement. [12646]

The Attorney–General: On 30 September 1997, the Crown Prosecution Service employed the full-time equivalent of 1,975.5 lawyers and 3,612 other staff, the majority of whom are case workers supporting lawyers at branch level to prepare cases for court.

Mr. Yeo: Is the Attorney-General aware that unless there is an immediate and substantial increase in Crown Prosecution Service staffing levels, his Government's much-vaunted aim of speeding up the workings of the criminal justice system will be just one more item on the ever-growing list of Labour's broken promises?

The Attorney–General: No. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will do me the favour of recalling that we stated during the election campaign that we would put to the people—as we did successfully—the policy that in at least our first couple of years in office, we would operate within the spending constraints laid down by the previous Government. Within that policy, Sir Iain Glidewell is conducting his review and I am sure that he will point out any difficulties that arise from the operation of the Crown Prosecution Service.

Mr. Dismore: I visited my local Crown Prosecution Service branch during the summer and found there a highly motivated group of people working hard, obviously in trying circumstances. I was very pleased that when I raised a specific case, the service was prepared to review its decision and to agree to prosecute a case that it had previously not prosecuted. I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's point about the review by Sir Iain Glidewell. When will it be completed?

The Attorney–General: On the first matter, I welcome very much my hon. Friend's visit to his area office of the CPS. I hope that all hon. Members, when they were given the branch reports during the summer, were invited to visit their area office, and I hope that those visits were carried out.

I am glad to know that the Crown Prosecution Service listened to my hon. Friend's representations. Ultimately, however, the service has to have regard to the independence of the prosecutor in reaching its determination. On the last matter, I hope very much that Sir Iain Glidewell's report will be published in the new year.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I welcome what the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) said about the motivation and good quality of the Crown Prosecution Service in his area. In light of the Attorney-General's decision to put more senior staff into the front line in the sense of having 43 chief Crown prosecutors—one for each police area—is he satisfied that he has sufficient staff to carry out other functions, such as caring properly for victims and witnesses, about which I am sure he would have told us if he had had the opportunity? That requires not only motivation but staff, including support staff, to assist the Crown prosecutors in court on the day. In that context, will the Attorney-General liaise with the Lord Chancellor's Department to ensure that there is somewhere for victims and witnesses to be cared for when the time comes?

The Attorney–General: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Victim support has a high priority. I am sure that, if there are deficiencies in the CPS in terms of staff, Sir Iain Glidewell and his review team will point them out. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has announced only recently that there will be additional money available for victim support. These are matters of great importance. Frequently, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, there are practical problems in ensuring that witnesses are properly informed and properly cared for in the courts. The Lord Chancellor is fully aware of that and of the importance of carrying out obligations under the victims charter. The CPS plays an important role, with the police, in ensuring that those obligations are carried out.

34. **Mr. David Heath:** What plans he has to introduce local accountability in respect of the prosecution policy of the Crown Prosecution Service. [12647]

The Attorney–General: The Crown Prosecution Service is already exposed to substantial local scrutiny. Each branch, for example, now publishes its own annual report, commencing for the calendar year 1996. We are taking the process further through the reorganisation of the Crown Prosecution Service into 42 areas.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the Attorney-General for that answer, which touches on management if not accountability. Does he, however, understand the dismay and frustration of communities, such as those in the Martock and Wincanton areas of my constituency, when high-profile police action takes place and the result is either a decision not to prosecute or, worse still, no decision on whether to prosecute after more than 12 months? Does he agree that there is a need for far greater transparency and far greater local accountability in the Crown Prosecution Service?

The Attorney–General: Matters involving the police are for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

As regards local accountability, I hope very much that the reports that were published in the hon. Gentleman's area in July set out and put in the shop window the activities of the CPS in his area for the past year. He is concerned with local accountability. I know that he was invited, with all other hon. Members representing the south-west—and, it is to be hoped, other areas as well—to visit his CPS branch in July. So far, I fear that he has not replied. I hope he will do so fairly quickly.

Mr. Bermingham: Does the Attorney-General agree that accountability in the Crown Prosecution Service—in which I declare a family interest—is very much dependent on the quality of the people employed in it? The quality is undoubtedly very high. If we are to have consistency between one area and another, we must obviously have a central and not a local direction.

The Attorney–General: The people at the coal face carry the primary responsibility to the public, but the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) who tabled the question is concerned with something greater. Whether the CPS should be a national service and whether there should be local scrutiny in the form of committees, such as a watch committee or a police committee, was debated in the House. The Philips report on that was rejected because it was felt that the paramount consideration should be the independence of the prosecutor as part of a national service.

Mr. Greenway: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has just confirmed the central point about which I wanted to ask him. Will he therefore assure the House that, in whatever changes his Government decide to implement to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the CPS, its independence from local pressures will remain the central point of its operations?

The Attorney–General: I took part in the debate when the Crown Prosecution Service was set up, and made loud and clear my view that there were difficulties as regards local accountability, which were enumerated by example. It is important that local communities are aware of what is happening. It is important that there is liaison at the highest level locally with the chief constable. It is important that local communities can discuss and debate whatever is happening—hence, I hope, as an input into the public domain, the branch reports. Further than that I will not go.

Business of the House

3.31 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on the business for next week.

MONDAY 10 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill.

TUESDAY 11 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Bank of England Bill.

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Local Government (Contracts) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 12 NOVEMBER—Until 2 pm, there will be the usual morning debates on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Second Reading of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill.

THURSDAY 13 NOVEMBER—Debate on the modernisation of the House of Commons on a motion to approve the first report of the Modernisation Committee.

FRIDAY 14 NOVEMBER—Debate on policing of London on a motion for the Adjournment of the House

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows.

MONDAY 17 NOVEMBER—Opposition Day [4th allotted day] [first part].

Debate until about 7 pm on a subject to be decided by the Liberal Democrats, which will be announced next week.

Motion to approve the eighth report from the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

TUESDAY 18 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 19 NOVEMBER—Until 2 pm, there will be the usual morning debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Consideration in Committee of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill [first day].

THURSDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Motion to take note of the outstanding reports of the Public Accounts Committee, which we originally scheduled for Thursday next week. Details will be given in the *Official Report*.

FRIDAY 21 NOVEMBER—Debate on the review of civil justice and legal aid on a motion for the Adjournment of the House

The House will also wish to know that, on Wednesday 12 November, there will be a debate on landfill waste sites in European Standing Committee A. On Wednesday 19 November, there will be a debate on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies: controls on cattle, sheep and goats, in European Standing Committee A, and a debate on the draft general budget for 1998 in European Standing Committee B.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report*.

[*Wednesday 12 November:*

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Community Document: 6692/97, Landfill Waste Sites. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 155-iii (1997–98).

Wednesday 19 November:

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Community Document: 10047/97, TSE: Prohibition of Risk Material.

Relevant European Legislation Committee Reports: HC 155-iii (1997–98) and HC 155-iv (1997–98).

European Standing B—Relevant European Community Document: 10153/97, Draft General Budget 1998. Relevant European Legislation Committee Report: HC 155-iv (1997-98)

Thursday 2 November:

Public Accounts Committee Reports, Session 1996–97.

Report No:	*Title*	*HC No.*	*Publication Date*
1	The office of Gas Supply: The Regulation of Gas Tariffs (The Gas Cost Index)	37	14 November
2	Progress in Completing the New British Library	38	20 November
3	The Sale of the Mining Operations of the British Coal Corporation	60	21 November
4	The Construction of Quarry House	69	27 November
5	Highways Agency: The Bridge Programme	83	28 November
6	The Audit of European Community Transactions	84	4 December
7	The Hospital Information Support Systems Initiative	97	5 December
8	Information Technology Services Agency: Outsourcing The Service Delivery Operations	98	11 December
9	Resource Accounting and Proposals for a Resource-based System of Supply	167	15 January
10	Excess Vote NI DHSS		19 February
11	Excess Votes Classes I, IV, VII, XIII, XIV, XVII (7&13)	293	13 February
12	ODA: Turkish Universities Equipment Project	70	27 February
13	H M Treasury: The Second Sale of Shares in National Power and PowerGen	151	6 March
14	Dept for Education & Employment: Financial Control of Payments made under the Training for Work and Youth Training Programmes in England	61	13 March
15	The Award of the First Three Passenger Rail Franchises	39	13 March
16	Office of Electricity Regulation, Office of Gas Supply: The Work of the Directors General of Telecommunications, Gas Supply, Water Services and Electricity Supply	89	19 March
17	Health of the Nation: A Progress Report	85	20 March
18	National Savings: Financial Reporting	214	25 March
19	Former Yorkshire Regional Health Authority	432	26 March

Report No:	*Title*	*HC No.*	*Publication Date*
20	Payments to the National Lottery Distribution Fund	99	27 March
21	The Management of Space in Higher Education Institutions in Wales	159	2 April
22	British Rail Maintenance Limited: The Sale of Maintenance Depots	168	3 April
23	Ministry of Defence: The Financial Management of the Military Operation in the Former Yugoslavia	242	4 April
24	Department of Transport: Freight Facilities Grants in England	284	8 April
25	Plymouth Development Corporation: Regularity Propriety and Control of Expenditure	450	8 April
REPLIES			
	Treasury Minute on the First to Eighth Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts 1996–97	CM 3559	12 February 1997
	Treasury Minute on the Ninth Report from the Committee of Public Accounts 1996–97	CM 3577	12 March 1997
	Treasury Minute on the Twelfth to Twenty-Fifth Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts 1996-97	CM 3714	16 July 1997

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): I thank the right hon. Lady for her statement. She will doubtless recall that last week my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) asked for a debate on the Government's policy on higher education. Despite two such debates this week and despite the Prime Minister's frantic consultation of his briefing notes yesterday, it became clear from his inability to answer a simple question on the matter that he does not understand Government policy on higher education.

Will she arrange for another debate, at a time when the Prime Minister can attend, so that he can grasp what is perfectly clear to the rest of us—that his policy will mean that Scottish and European Union students at Scottish universities have their fourth-year fees met from public funds, while English, Welsh and Northern Irish students do not? He will then be better equipped than he was yesterday to explain precisely how the situation that that policy has created contributes to his manifesto pledge of equal opportunity for all.

Will the right hon. Lady also arrange for an early debate on the Government's policy on the tobacco industry's sponsorship of sport? May we have an explanation from the Secretary of State for Health of the criteria applied by the Minister for Public Health in deciding that formula one racing should be exempted from the Government's much-vaunted ban on tobacco sponsorship? Was that decision based on the fact that formula one racing is more popular than angling, healthier than cricket or more accessible to many than darts—or were other considerations taken into account? In the interests of open government, we should be told.

May we have an early debate on open government, so that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Cabinet Minister responsible for open government, can come out of hiding to expand on his remarks to local media, reported in *The Times* on 20 October, that he is being forced out of office by a smear campaign conducted by a senior colleague? Such a debate would also enable him to explain to the House why he needed trips to the United States, Canada and Australasia to study open government. After all, his party's manifesto pledges should have meant that by now he was a member of one.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I really do think that the right hon. Lady's final remarks are ridiculous, coming from a member of Government who took no steps whatever in the direction of open government. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will make a statement in the House when he presents the White Paper on freedom of information, and I am sure that many hon. Members look forward to that.

On the subject of higher education, the right hon. Lady is right that we have had two debates recently, during which we heard no constructive suggestions from the Conservative party on how to deal with the problems in higher education that we inherited. If she is interested in the matter, she will be aware that education Question Time is next week, so any outstanding issues can be dealt with—not that there will be many.

The position on formula one sponsorship has been made clear, not least by the Prime Minister yesterday. Formula one is a genuinely global sport and it relies on tobacco advertising much more than any other sport, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health said back in June and July when the issue was first considered. A European Union ban of the type suggested would lead to alternative circuits in other parts of the world taking the sport, and British viewers would still see it on television. Any ban imposed would thus be circumvented.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): May I ask my right hon. Friend to return to the issue of higher education, which was raised by the shadow Leader of the House? What kind of legislative vehicle do the Government intend to use for the introduction of tuition fees? Will primary or secondary legislation be required? Irrespective of the vehicle to be used, will she give a firm guarantee that there will be a full and frank debate—preferably a full-day debate—in the House?

Mrs. Taylor: I think that primary legislation will be required. Therefore, there will be a Second Reading debate which, I would imagine, will be a full debate, as is normal.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Is the right hon. Lady aware that we, at least, supported the previous policy on tobacco sponsorship of formula one, and we agree very much with the EU Social Affairs Commissioner who has said that the Government's decision is a disaster and a complete U-turn? We would welcome a statement.

An equally important issue is the fate of rape victims in court, to which the Home Secretary referred in a BBC interview this morning. When can we expect a statement on the legislation to be introduced? How quickly can it be introduced? May we be assured that the Home Secretary will not be as dilatory as the previous Government were in trying to deal with this serious problem?

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

Will the Leader of the House give an undertaking that there will be a debate as soon as the Public Accounts Commission has considered the evidence of the chief executive of the Child Support Agency, who yesterday outlined the appalling level of bungling which all of us, as constituency Members, are still experiencing with that agency?

Finally, the Minister of Agriculture gave notice earlier in the week that the Government are actively considering our representations that there should be a full inquiry into not just the last 18 months of the BSE crisis, but the way in which it developed under the previous Government. When will we get an announcement on that inquiry?

Mrs. Taylor: To take the last point first, the hon. Gentleman himself pointed out what my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture said earlier in the week, and I have nothing to add to that.

On tobacco sponsorship, as I said a few moments ago, there is little point in having a ban that is counter-productive. If we drive the sport out of this country, people will still see the adverts on television because the pictures cannot be blocked.

I do not think that we can have a debate in the very near future on the important issue of rape victims, but we have made progress on the matter. The Home Secretary announced in June that he was establishing an urgent review to ensure that all vulnerable or intimidated witnesses received better treatment from the criminal justice system. That working group is taking evidence and we hope that it will be able to report to Ministers by the end of the year. Further statements will follow from that.

On the PAC and the inquiries into the CSA, I should be surprised if there is any hon. Member who has not experienced considerable difficulty in trying to pursue CSA cases on behalf of constituents. It is an appalling situation, and obviously there are very deep problems which will take some time to resolve.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): There will be a warm welcome for today's announcement on the reduction in the number of animals killed in laboratories in Britain, but there will be some disappointment that the total of 3 million animals killed every year will be reduced by a mere couple of hundred. Will my right hon. Friend arrange for a debate so that this complex matter can be discussed? Has she seen early-day motion 342?

[*That this House notes with dismay that 400,000 animals are killed every year just to provide body parts for medical research when many scientists agree that test-tube studies using donated human tissue give more reliable results, but that lack of availability prevents its widespread use; urges that donated human tissue be used wherever possible to save animals and achieve more accurate results; and calls upon the Government to establish and co-ordinate a national network of human tissue banks to overcome the shortage of suitable human tissue and to introduce a new donor card that gives the public the option of donating organs for transplantation and/or tissue for research.*]

A debate would enable us, as a superior species, to decide that it is unacceptable for us to treat sentient living creatures as if they were jars of chemicals in experiments designed not to improve human health, but to increase the profits of commercial industries.

Mrs. Taylor: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, although I cannot promise an early debate. He is right to say that there is a great deal of public concern about testing on animals, and that is why the statement from the Home Office today about the end to cosmetic testing on animals will be welcomed. My hon. Friend should give credit for the significant step forward that has been made on cosmetic testing.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Will the Leader of the House next week revisit her answer on Tuesday to my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) about the Finance Bill? I realise that it was an oral answer given in the heat of the moment, but she gave the impression that this year's treatment would become par for the course. That would cause alarm in the City of London.

Mrs. Taylor: Pro rata, this year's Finance Bill had as much time as the Bills of previous years, so I do not think that our treatment of that Bill was unprecedented.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to consider my request for a Members' cycle allowance yet? Does she think that a debate on Members' travel allowances would be helpful?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not sure that it will be possible to have a debate, but I hope that we can make some progress on the cycle allowance in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): Can the Leader of the House make time next week for a debate on the European Union proposal to do away with duty-free allowances for travel between EU countries? Would it not be an excellent opportunity to put pressure on the Government, before the Luxembourg Council, to get the European Union to do something about that and to change its mind? Otherwise, will not the measure have an adverse affect on British carriers, particularly those operating out of Heathrow, which is the borough in which my constituency lies, and on many enterprises such as the British Airports Authority and others with duty-free shops that provide badly needed employment?

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman has made his point in such a way that he does not need a debate.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): Will the Leader of the House find time between now and Christmas to cause a debate to be held on Government computers, so that we could cause the computers that serve the Department of Social Security and the Inland Revenue to talk to each other—so that we might know who is in the black economy and who is not—and perhaps at the same time consider the quality of the Department of Trade and Industry computer, which appears to be giving the wrong answers at present?

Mrs. Taylor: I do not think that there are too many wrong answers, but there was certainly an example last

week when one of my hon. Friends had to correct figures on export licences given during the previous Administration because of computer faults. I understand that that programme has been scrapped.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate next week on the working of the Department of Trade and Industry, because it is a well-known fact that a number of Ministers there are disqualified from speaking on certain subjects due to conflicts of interest? May we know who is competent to do what—if any?

Mrs. Taylor: All the Ministers there are extremely competent.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): In response to the question from the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) about interests, I think that the Tories have got a cheek to be talking about people with interests, when 90 or 100 out of 164 of them have got three and four moonlighting jobs. If we are to have a debate, let us have one about that. On the more important question, because they are a trivial lot, I heard my right hon. Friend refer to the Child Support Agency as being in an appalling mess. That is an interesting phrase from a Minister. I know that a review is taking place and we all know that there are problems, that it has been in operation for five years and that at the beginning it was argued that it would provide benefits for women in particular. We all now know that as many women as men object to the Child Support Act 1995. Can we have an assurance that, perhaps, the idea of scrapping that Act is on the cards?

Mrs. Taylor: No, it is a question not of scrapping the Child Support Agency, but of reviewing its workings. We had a debate just before the summer recess and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security said afterwards that she had found it extremely useful to hear directly the experiences of many colleagues in respect of the problems of the CSA. I hope that we can ensure that the agency works more effectively, but, as I said, the problems are very severe indeed. A great backlog of work has not been completed when it should have been and, although my right hon. Friend is trying to resolve the situation, it is difficult to see that it and the problems that are arising can be dealt with in the very near future. It will be a long haul to get the agency back on track.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): May we have a debate next week on inward investment? There seems to be some friction between the Scottish Office and the Department of Trade and Industry about who is to take the lead on the matter. There is the curious concept of a concordat. Is that to be in writing? Will it be promulgated? How will it be umpired if there are disputes? How will problems be resolved within the machinery of government?

Will the Scottish Parliament be responsible for inward investment into Scotland, or the Welsh Assembly for that into Wales? How will all that be reconciled within the machinery of government, especially as there is obvious friction between the Scottish Office and the DTI? It would be helpful to have a debate as soon as possible, so that we could all have a clear understanding of who is doing what.

Mrs. Taylor: I do not think that there is a need for an early debate, because there is no such friction. The matter concerning the Scottish Parliament was dealt with to some extent in the White Paper, and will be dealt with further when a Bill is introduced and we debate it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Will my right hon. Friend give further consideration to providing time for a debate on the Child Support Agency, bearing in mind two cases in my surgery last week? In the first case, a father has been asked to pay an exorbitant and impractical sum that he clearly cannot afford; in the second, a mother informs me that all her efforts to get maintenance for her child have been to no avail, despite the intervention of the CSA. Is not that an illustration, on both sides, of the CSA simply not working? It is causing tremendous difficulties, despite having been in existence for several years.

Mrs. Taylor: I, too, have cases like those that my hon. Friend described—we all find that a significant proportion of our case work concerns CSA cases—so I have every sympathy with him. However, I am not sure that debating the problems will get us much further. Action is needed within the CSA to get its house in order.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May we please have an early debate on the Government's programme for convergence of our economy with those of our European partners, so that we can move as swiftly as the Government want towards a European currency? Such a debate would give the Chancellor the opportunity to explain to the House how today's increase in interest rates contributes to that convergence process.

Mrs. Taylor: The Chancellor dealt more than adequately with all those questions in his recent statement. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to debate the subject, I am sure that many in his own party would be willing to oblige.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Can my right hon. Friend give us any information about when legislation for regional development agencies will be introduced, bearing in mind how important that is to the Government? Perhaps the Bill could be introduced in draft form, to allow people to consider it fully, given its implications and the various views that are held on it.

Mrs. Taylor: I understand my hon. Friend's long-term interest in the legislation. I do not think that it will be possible to introduce the Bill in draft form, but Ministers in the Department intend to introduce a White Paper.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Can the Leader of the House arrange an early debate on the environment and planning procedure? I cannot believe that my constituency experience is unique. A cement manufacturer applied to the county council for permission for major quarrying work. The council hummed and hawed for more than a year, then passed the matter to the Minister for the Environment, so that either he could approve it or, if he did not want to do so, it would be approved after a five-week stay of execution.

The Minister had the opportunity to hold a public inquiry to allow the people of Clitheroe, Chatburn and Worston, and tourists who come to the Ribble Valley from all over the country, to have their say about the

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

major impact of a quarry that will take 30 years to dig and will be the size of 28 football pitches, but he did not do so, so the application will be approved by gagging people not only in the Ribble Valley but throughout the country.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong case. I do not know the details of the planning application to which he refers, but any procedures followed were those drawn up by the previous Conservative Government.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): In view of the incontrovertible evidence, which appeared in *The Independent* today, of the permanent damage caused by the use of Ecstasy, may we have an early debate on the subject?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend raises a problem which will be of concern to many. The evidence presented today on the dangers of Ecstasy reinforces some of the concerns that have been mentioned in the past. We should welcome any contribution to the body of scientific knowledge on the dangers of such drugs. In recent years, about 60 deaths in the UK have been due specifically to Ecstasy. The only message that we can send out is that young people should not be taking such drugs.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate, or at least a statement, on the time that Ministers take to reply, or give full replies, to hon. Members' questions? I understand that Departments try to answer such letters within 15 working days, but I cannot be alone in having letters outstanding for, in one case, 55 working days and, in another, involving the Treasury, for 47 working days—and still no reply yet. I understand that Ministers receive many letters from hon. Members, but if we are to do our jobs properly, we need to respond to our constituents' concerns rather quicker than that.

Mrs. Taylor: If the hon. Gentleman gives me details of the replies that are outstanding, I shall look into the matter.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): After yesterday's crash landing at Heathrow, is my right hon. Friend aware of the mounting public concern about aircraft safety, particularly in the Thames valley, following three near misses during the past few months, including one above Reading? Will she allow parliamentary time for us to discuss this important issue and, in particular, the Civil Aviation Authority's hare-brained scheme to reduce the distance between aircraft approaching Heathrow from 3 miles to two and a half miles?

Mrs. Taylor: I am sure that hon. Members will join me in paying tribute to the pilot of the aircraft which was in such difficulties yesterday and which he managed to land safely. It is appalling to think of the tragedy that could have occurred. We should be grateful that he was able to exercise such skill on that occasion.

My hon. Friend raises the problem of near misses, which is obviously an issue of great concern to him and his constituents. I regret that I cannot find time for a debate on that subject in the near future, but it may be an appropriate subject for a debate on a Wednesday morning, were he fortunate enough to have such an application accepted.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): May we have an early statement from the Minister for Public Health to clear up the apparent conflict of interest between her family interests and her decision to exempt formula one motor racing from tobacco advertising?

It is also a matter of concern that the *Financial Times* was briefed by the Department of Health's press office to say that the issue had been cleared with Lord Nolan. As it happens, Lord Nolan appeared before the Select Committee for Public Administration this morning and when I asked him whether he had any knowledge of that, he said that he had none whatever. He said that the first that he had heard of it was when he read the *Financial Times* this morning. May we have an urgent statement from the Minister for Public Health to clear up both those matters?

Mrs. Taylor: I am happy to clarify the situation and deal with the hon. Gentleman's point. When my hon. Friend became the Minister for Public Health she did exactly what was expected of her, which was to abide completely by the guidance which is laid down for Ministers. Her husband informed the Department of Health of his professional activities relating to formula one motor racing and, in order to avoid any possible conflict of interest and at his own suggestion, he resigned his position as a non-executive director of Benetton Formula Ltd.

As a result of that experience, my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health wrote to Sir Robin Butler on 9 June explaining the arrangements that she had agreed with the Secretary of State and the permanent secretary to ensure that there was no conflict of interest between her official duties and her husband's interests. My hon. Friend wrote that letter to draw Sir Robin's attention to what she perceived was a lack of specific guidance on the private interests of a Minister's spouse in the version of "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" that had been issued under the previous Government in 1992. That document was being updated at the time, and paragraph 116 of the ministerial code issued in July 1997 covered the point. It draws attention to the need for Ministers to have regard to their spouse's, as well as to their own, private interests. My hon. Friend has been absolutely open, and has obeyed both the letter and the spirit of the code of conduct.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): As a member of the Public Accounts Select Committee, may I ask my right hon. Friend to reconsider the need for an urgent debate on the appalling performance of the Child Support Agency? The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General reveals that 85 per cent. of outstanding balances were in error, and one in six of those were errors of more than £1,000. That has caused enormous misery and distress to families throughout the country. I believe that a debate on the Floor of the House would enable hon. Members who deal with these problems to contribute to the change process that is required. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the

agency cannot even find the right files to deal with cases, and said as much to the Public Accounts Committee this week?

Mrs. Taylor: As I said, I cannot promise a debate, but the information that my hon. Friend has conveyed to the House reinforces the concern that many hon. Members have expressed today. The figures are extremely alarming, and I am aware of the significant concern in the House about the matter. The Secretary of State for Social Security shares that concern, and I will ensure that she understands the strength of feeling that has been expressed today. I am sure that she will be reinforced in her determination to tackle this problem.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): If the conduct of the Minister for Public Health is irreproachable, why is the Leader of the House so reluctant to grant the House a debate on the important and topical issue of tobacco sponsorship? Such a debate would enable the Government to explain to millions of sports fans why their preferred sport is being treated so much less favourably than motor racing.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is arguing against any ban, whereas some of his hon. Friends were almost arguing for a total ban. There seems to be some inconsistency. I do not think that there is any need for an early debate on that topic.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention the "two minutes" campaign of the Royal British Legion, and ask her to consult the relevant authorities in the House on whether it would be possible for all Committees to observe two minutes' silence on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not sure which Committees will be sitting at that time next Tuesday. I shall make inquiries along the lines suggested by my hon. Friend, because I know that all hon. Members consider it to be an important event and may wish to observe two minutes' silence in Committee, as they would if they were working in their offices.

Madam Speaker: The Leader of the House may like to know that I have asked all Departments of the House to observe two minutes' silence at that time. It is up to each individual, but I hope that it will be observed throughout the House, as it will in my Department.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): As a former member of the Greater London council, may I ask the right hon. Lady whether she agrees with me that the electors of London are capable of differentiating between a Greater London authority and a mayor, and should be allowed to vote for one, but not necessarily for the other? While she is on her feet, will she confirm that current Members of Parliament who happen to be former leaders of the GLC will be allowed to stand for the position of mayor of London?

Mrs. Taylor: I would not dream of suggesting who might or might stand for that position, but I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognises that the legislation and the result of the referendum are likely to be successful.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Further to what was said by the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), is the Leader of the House aware that the President of the Board of Trade has said that she wishes to oversee inward investment in Scotland? She currently does not have that power. Is it not strange that she should seek to take powers to the Department of Trade and Industry, while the Government are seeking to devolve those same powers to the new Scottish Parliament? May we have a debate on the subject?

Mrs. Taylor: As I said earlier, there is no conflict between the Ministers involved, because our overall objective must be to improve inward investment in Britain as a whole. I am sure that there will be plenty of opportunities to explore those specific points when we debate the legislation to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Will the Leader of the House tell us when we can expect to see the Welsh and Scottish Bills? As has already been pointed out on a couple of occasions, there is confusion about why the Government should be seeking to devolve power on the one hand, and to recentralise decisions on inward investment on the other. Seeing the Bills would give us an early opportunity to discuss the ever-increasing turf war between Cabinet Ministers, and the ever-diminishing roles which are now humiliating the Secretary of State for Scotland and pushing the Secretary of State for Wales towards a very welcome resignation.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman asked when he would be able to see the Bills. He has seen the White Papers, as have the people of Scotland and Wales. That is why they supported our proposals. The Bills are not ready yet, but a great deal of work has been done. I am happy to report that there has been good progress on the legislation, and it will be produced in due course.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): As a number of Members experienced long delays before receiving answers to their letters to Department of Trade and Industry Ministers when the House was not sitting, will the Leader of the House invite the President of the Board of Trade to make a statement to the House next week, explaining exactly when she and her ministerial colleagues were and were not in the Department during the summer recess?

Mrs. Taylor: I would not comment on the holidays that Conservative Members—or, indeed, hon. Members in any party—have had, but I know that Ministers worked extremely hard throughout the recess. That is why the Government are in such a strong position now. I shall not comment on the specific point raised by the hon. Gentleman, not least because it was raised with you on Tuesday, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): May we have an emergency debate on agriculture, so that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food can come to the House and explain the outrageous remarks that he made on Tuesday, when he accused the farming community of being both lazy and cheats?

Mrs. Taylor: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was here for MAFF questions, but I do not think that there are any outstanding problems. Certainly, emergency debates are not a matter for me.

Orders of the Day

Supreme Court (Offices) Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

4.7 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is short, and modest in its scope. Indeed, it might be characterised as a technical adjustment to the machinery of government. It does, however, concern an office of great importance. I believe that some reasonably detailed explanation of its background and effect will help the House to understand the need for the Bill itself, and for it to make rapid progress.

For technical reasons, the Bill's title refers to offices of the Supreme Court, but it concerns solely the Lord Chancellor's Department. Within living memory, that Department was a very small organisation staffed almost exclusively by lawyers, but it is now a major Department of State, with a wide range of responsibilities, including overall responsibility for the court system as a whole, as well as the legal aid system.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise to the Minister for intervening at this stage, but he used the phrase "rapid progress" a moment ago. I wonder whether he will explain quite what lies behind that phrase. Does it mean that there will be any deviation from the normal process of scrutiny of legislation by the House, or will the process take place in the normal way?

Madam Speaker: That seemed to me more like an intervention than a point of order, but perhaps the Minister will tell us the answer.

Mr. Hoon: Obviously, procedure is a matter for the House to decide, but in due course I shall invite the House, if it considers it appropriate, to deal with all stages of the Bill. As I say, that is clearly a matter for the House. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I understand that it was announced in the House on Thursday that all stages would be taken today.

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful, Madam Speaker.

The Department's budget is more than £2 billion, and it has a staff of more than 11,000. Selection of the Department's permanent secretary, however, is still constrained by restrictions first imposed when the permanent secretary headed an organisation of five officials.

The present restrictions prevent anyone from being considered for appointment as permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor who is not either a barrister or solicitor of at least 10 years' standing, or a civil servant with at least five years' experience in the Lord Chancellor's Department. The purpose of the Bill is to remove those restrictions, so that future appointments may be made from the widest field of possible candidates.

The post of permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor dates back to 1885. Before that, the Lord Chancellor was assisted by a principal secretary who was an officer of the Supreme Court. The principal secretary's duties were political as well as legal, and he was appointed by the Lord Chancellor personally, and generally left office along with the Lord Chancellor.

In 1885, however, the existing principal secretary became a permanent officer, and his political duties devolved to a private secretary, leaving the permanent secretary with duties which were largely legal. It was agreed by the Treasury that these duties required a legal qualification for their proper performance, and that the permanent secretary should be a barrister of at least seven years' standing, which was later raised to 10 years, and was enshrined in statute in 1925.

As I have said, the Lord Chancellor's Office at that time was very small, and the permanent secretary performed many legal duties. It was appropriate that the permanent secretary should always be a lawyer while the Lord Chancellor's Office remained a small organisation without significant administrative duties, as it did for many years. However, after the Courts Act 1971, the Lord Chancellor assumed overall responsibility for the administration of the court system as a whole, and the organisation was restructured as the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): I hope that I understand the Minister correctly. He is saying that, because the Lord Chancellor's Department now controls a budget of £2 billion or more, it wants the widest possible choice in the appointment of a permanent secretary and the ability to go outside the civil service and the law, perhaps into industry and other such places, to get the most efficient and able man or woman for the job.

Mr. Hoon: We are certainly proposing that the present restrictions should be eliminated. They severely limit the availability of candidates.

The present permanent secretary has restructured the Department around an administrative and policy-making core of officials, who get legal advice, when they need it, from a separately managed group comprising legally qualified civil servants headed by a legal adviser answering directly to the permanent secretary. Therefore, the old arrangement under which a small number of legally qualified staff undertook all duties, whether legal or administrative, has disappeared.

With the ending of the old structure went the justification for requiring the permanent secretary to be a lawyer. This was recognised in part by changes made by the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990, which allowed a non-lawyer with at least five years' experience in the Department to be considered for the post.

Some concern was expressed during the passage of that legislation in another place that it might presage some kind of downgrading of this important position. In case there are similar concerns about this Bill, I assure the House that the intention is quite the opposite. It is precisely because of the importance of the post and the qualities that it requires that its future holders should be the most able and experienced candidates available, selected from the widest possible field.

Successive Lord Chancellors have been well served by a distinguished line of permanent secretaries, who have ably managed the organisation throughout the changes

that I have described. However, the existing restriction has no parallel for any other Department, and is no longer appropriate to what has, over the years, become a major Department of State, with a large budget and staff and a wide range of responsibilities.

Furthermore, in addition to the expansion of functions and changes in the structure of the Lord Chancellor's Department, the Lord Chancellor's responsibilities as a member of the Government have greatly expanded.

The Lord Chancellor now chairs the Queen's Speeches and Future Legislation Committee, responsible for the Government's legislative programme, and all the Cabinet Sub-Committees concerned with the Government's programme for constitutional change, as well as serving on numerous other committees. Together with the more specifically legal and departmental concerns, these additional responsibilities emphasise the necessity for the Lord Chancellor to have the advice and assistance of a permanent secretary of the highest quality and experience, selected from the widest possible field of candidates.

The effect of the existing restrictions, however, is to limit the field to such an extent that there is available across the entire senior civil service only a handful of officials who are of the seniority and experience ordinarily required of a permanent secretary and who also fulfil the existing statutory criteria for the office of permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor. It is therefore imperative that those restrictions be removed.

The Bill therefore simply removes from schedule 2 of the Supreme Court Act 1981 the reference to the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor and Clerk of the Crown in Chancery. That has the effect of removing from that office special provisions which are, by virtue of sections 88 and 92 of the 1981 Act, applied to certain offices of the Supreme Court set out in schedule 2.

As well as removing the restriction on appointment to the office, that will result in provisions concerning tenure of the office no longer applying to it, so that the provisions governing the retirement age of the Lord Chancellor's permanent secretary will be brought into line with those applicable to other permanent secretaries.

The Bill does not affect the office of permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor in any other way. In particular, the permanent secretary will continue to hold the office of Clerk of the Crown in Chancery, and to be the head of the permanent staff of the Crown Office, which supports the Lord Chancellor in his capacity as Keeper of the Great Seal. No other office is affected.

The present permanent secretary, who has already been persuaded to remain in office longer than originally planned, is to retire in April 1998. To give time for his successor to be properly selected, the existing statutory restrictions must be removed by the end of the year.

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): Will the Minister assist me with this point, which I may have missed in his explanation? Is he saying that, if the legislation that he now proposes becomes law, the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor's Department will continue to be Clerk to the Crown in Chancery; and if so, does not that second office have a requirement that its holder be a lawyer?

Mr. Hoon: The answers to the hon. Member's questions are yes and no. It is anticipated that the permanent secretary will continue to be Clerk of the Crown in Chancery. That position does not require the office-holder to be a lawyer.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you.

Mr. Hoon: To meet the timetable that I have set out, the Bill must make rapid progress, and it is for that reason that I ask the House to give it a fair wind, and allow it, if appropriate, not only to be read a second time but to pass through its remaining stages in the House today, so that it may be considered in another place with the necessary dispatch.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1997.

Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Act 1997.

4.17 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I listened with care to what the Parliamentary Secretary said in opening the case for the Bill, and we are anxious to give the Bill a fair wind, up to a point. He pointed out that the office of permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor is one of great importance. I entirely agree, and I am sure that he intended to say that it had been an office of great importance throughout the decades and, indeed, the centuries that it has existed.

Mr. Hoon *indicated assent.*

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is nodding to that. He added that the Lord Chancellor's Department has grown greatly in recent years. It has taken on an active role and responsibility for the court services in a way that makes it a Department of State in a late-20th-century manner, which to a considerable extent in earlier years it was not.

That means, however, that the Department has two important functions. It has the important function of being the right-hand man or woman to the Lord Chancellor in his ancient office—and his office is almost unique to this country, and extremely important to our constitution. Montesquieu might be turning in his grave, but I am sure that the Parliamentary Secretary and I would stand up firmly for our constitution. His office is unique in that it is there to protect the separation of powers, not to overturn it.

What is said against us by those from other countries is that, because we have a senior Minister—one of the four most senior Ministers in any Government—who is a member of the legislature, the Executive and the judiciary, we do not respect the separation of powers. We do. In our pyramidal form of constitution, the Lord Chancellor is answerable to Parliament—the highest court in the land—and therefore is answerable to every Member of this House and of the other place for the proper performance of his duties, which include the protection of the true separation of the powers of the judiciary.

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

We are willing and very ready to assist the passage of this Bill, subject to some modifications, because, with the added administrative functions of the Lord Chancellor, there will from time to time be a perfectly good case for the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor being other than a lawyer. It is highly desirable that, if he is to be somebody other than a lawyer, he should have had substantial departmental experience. The present law enables him to be permanent secretary and Clerk to the Crown in Chancery if he has had five years' experience in the Department.

I think that that should be long enough for the present Government. The Bill seeks to sweep that away, and to say, in effect, that somebody with no experience of the Department can become permanent secretary.

There are dangers in that, on which I will dwell shortly. The great importance of that ancient office means that the Lord Chancellor needs help in relation to his responsibility for the judiciary. One of his major roles is to appoint the judiciary. It is a role that Lord Chancellors of every political colour have carried out scrupulously over the centuries, with the assistance of their Department. It is immensely valuable to the Lord Chancellor in that responsibility and in his role as a link with the judicial process and the legal structure and legal establishment of our country that the permanent secretary should have long and profound experience of the legal profession.

A second aspect is the importance of the Government legal service. That service is 1,000 members strong. As the Attorney-General for five years, and Solicitor-General before that, I had the privilege of being responsible for that service, and I know that it consists of many people of high calibre. Some of them move within and across Departments.

There has been a trend in recent years for them to move more into the Lord Chancellor's Department than in the past. It is highly healthy that Government lawyers should move in and out of that Department and spend a period, from time to time, advising the Lord Chancellor, the Attorney-General or one of the great Departments of State—and spend time in an administrative role running, for example, the Court Service.

There are dangers here. I know that the Parliamentary Secretary and the Lord Chancellor have introduced this Bill in good faith. This is not a party political matter, and I am not making party political points. I am making important constitutional points, because the Bill does not stand alone in the Government's legislation. We must look at it alongside the Bill introduced earlier this week to change the system of justices' clerks in magistrates courts. Following the Home Secretary's announcement, the role of the justices' clerk as the legal adviser to the magistrates is to be divorced from the role of the justices' clerk as the administrative controller of the magistrates court service.

I have anxieties about that move. I only hope—I say this not to stray from the Bill, but to illustrate my point—that the Government will think again about that Bill. In practice—it is at a much more lowly level—I hope that we shall continue to find justices' clerks who have sat week in, week out, year in, year out, in service in court also moving up the administrative ladder.

Likewise, I hope that the lawyers in the Government legal service will move from advice-giving and legal roles to an administrative role—I think that the Minister has some sympathy with my argument—so that the administrators will know what they are talking about. Then, when they help to organise the list—we must remember that listing of court cases is a judicial function, and must remain so—and assist in the judicial running of the service, they will know what they are talking about. They will have sat in court and seen how cases are operated.

We need that sort of cross-fertilisation in the Department—

Mr. Forth: I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend will elaborate on his remarks. I was worried when I heard the Minister say that the Lord Chancellor's Department is just the same as any other Department of State and that we should therefore treat the permanent secretary in just the same way in terms of more open recruitment and so on.

But is not the Lord Chancellor's Department unique, in that it deals with important judicial matters? That cannot really be said of any other Department. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree, from his experience, that the Lord Chancellor's Department cannot be lumped in with all the other Departments for this or any other purpose?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure that the Minister would agree that the Lord Chancellor's Department is unique, for the reasons given by my hon. Friend, and by me earlier in my speech. The Lord Chancellor is a unique Minister. When he sits in Cabinet, he has a more independent role than any other member of the Government. He, together with the Attorney-General, has a role in ensuring respect within government for the rule of law.

In a free society, respect for the rule of law is as essential as, and historically much more deep-seated than, democracy itself. This country has believed in the rule of law and has operated it scrupulously from at least the end of the 17th century. We have built up a system of common and statute law by which all abide, and all Governments seek to abide.

If the Government are to abide by the rule of law, they must be well advised on the law. That is why I emphasise the importance of the Government legal service. It is not only that the Government should have 1,000 lawyers, but that they should have 1,000 lawyers who are respected, whose status is comparable with those of other members of the public service, and who can expect, if they have the necessary ability, to rise to the highest points in that service.

One of those highest pinnacles has, until this Bill, been reserved for lawyers who have usually spent a lifetime or a substantial part of a lifetime in law—sometimes in private practice, which has its own value, usually at the Bar, or as a solicitor. What message will go out to the Government legal service if this Bill is just passed on the nod, and the importance of the aspects I have mentioned is not recognised? The message will be that the Government is less interested in cherishing high-quality lawyers in its service.

If the Attorney-General were on the Treasury Bench for this debate, he might be tempted to intervene and say, "The Attorney-General—through the Treasury Solicitor

and Procurator-General—is the Minister responsible for the Government legal service, and he will look after that aspect of the matter." I am sure that the Attorney-General would attempt to look after the matter. He must, however, work hand in glove with the Lord Chancellor.

Mr. Hoon: There is no suggestion in the Bill that lawyers will be prevented from applying for the position or prevented from being appointed. The right hon. Gentleman has a very distinguished legal background. Surely he is not suggesting that lawyers should be afraid of competition from those who are not lawyers?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: No, I am not suggesting that. As I said, I am attempting to be helpful in the Bill's passage, but subject to modifications—to which I invite the Minister to give the closest attention.

A week ago, I gave Lord Irvine express notice of the point that I am about to make. Today, I tabled an amendment, which the House may consider. I owe an apology for the late tabling of that amendment. Despite some precedent to the contrary, I hope that the First Deputy Chairman will be able to accept my amendment. I will not, however, anticipate the matter one way or another.

The purpose of my amendment and the substance of the matter—which I shall invite the Parliamentary Secretary to deal with—is that, if the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor who is in post for a period of, usually, six or seven years, is not a lawyer, he should have a deputy secretary who is a lawyer. I should say that I have had the honour of knowing a number of permanent secretaries, although I cannot recall exactly how long the very distinguished current permanent secretary has been in post. There are senior members of the Lord Chancellor's Department who could perfectly well serve as deputy secretary.

A properly appointed deputy secretary in the Department—which is, as I said, unique—would, from an acknowledged and senior position, be available to assist the Lord Chancellor in maintaining his close relations with the judiciary. The Lord Chancellor himself will no doubt seek to maintain his daily relations with the judiciary extremely well, but a deputy secretary could assist with long-term relations with the more junior judiciary, with the Bar and in the operation of the current elaborate and very excellent legal framework, thereby providing feedback to the Lord Chancellor from the legal profession and on the operation of the courts. The vital duties of permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor in these aspects of his work will then be fulfilled thoroughly and carefully by someone who is competent to do so.

I look forward to debating my amendment. The Bill's passage might be assisted if the Parliamentary Secretary were able to give me a fair wind on it. I look forward to Ministers' considering constructively, and, I hope, accepting, either my amendment or one in similar terms. Doing so would facilitate knitting together in the 21st century the two great strains of the Lord Chancellor's Department, and thus avoid an ugly break—from a long-standing tradition in which only a lawyer could fill the position, to one in which no senior and specially demarcated office in the Lord Chancellor's Department is filled by a lawyer.

If the Bill is passed unamended, it will be possible that neither the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor nor his most senior assistants are lawyers. It would even be possible for there to be no lawyers in the Lord Chancellor's Department—although I do not suggest for one moment that that is likely to happen. The House should nevertheless remember that, over the years, Governments of all complexions have thought it right that the Lord Chancellor's right-hand official should be a lawyer. I am simply saying that, if No. 1 is not a lawyer, then, for the time being, No. 2 in the Department should be a lawyer, so as to protect that position. I very much hope that that will be accepted.

I am also surprised that the Government have proved themselves susceptible to agism. I see that the Parliamentary Secretary is frowning. Perhaps he has not read the Bill, but he certainly read out a speech passages of which sought to justify the fact that it would no longer be possible for a permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor to be kept on beyond the age of 60. What on earth is the argument for making it impossible for the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor to be kept on beyond the age of 60?

Personally, I can see no reason why other members of the civil service should not be capable of being kept on beyond that age. To say that that is not in conformity with other Departments is precisely the kind of awful argument that we have all had to suffer since kindergarten—that, because one person does not have something, no one else can have it. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not going to use that argument, although I strongly suspect that he is.

Mr. Hoon: I am going to use that argument, because it is important to have consistency across Whitehall. The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows full well from his previous experience that all permanent secretaries, apart from the one that we are debating, retire at 60. Furthermore, I had always assumed that the distinguished profession of lawyer required adherence to precedent.

Mr. John M. Taylor: That is the hon. Gentleman's best shot.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: If that is the hon. Gentleman's best shot, as is being said behind me, I do not think that he has thought it through, because the Bill would alter precedent. We would be sympathetic to some modification of precedent, but we should not then instantly leap to a slavish adherence to precedent in the opposite direction. The hon. Gentleman, who is a barrister if I read his biography correctly, has lectured on law, even to the new world, and should be a little more open-minded.

While we are discussing matters ad hominem and discussing agism, my researches have also discovered that the hon. Gentleman and I have one thing very firmly in common—we share a birthday.

Mr. Hoon: It is very soon.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Indeed, on 6 December. The hon. Gentleman is 15 years younger than I am, but the Lord Chancellor is only 18 months younger.

I anticipate that the Lord Chancellor, who will be 60 before the likely date of a general election—he will be 60 on 23 June 2000 if I read his biography correctly in one of the reference books—will be anxious to continue as Lord Chancellor at least for the term of this Parliament.

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

If "Two-term Tony", as I believe he is coming to be known, should have his way and win two terms, I suspect that there will be a "Don't Ditch Derry" move. The Lord Chancellor will hope to be Lord Chancellor in a future Labour Government, should one be elected by some mischance. He would then be soldiering on well over the age of 60.

Mr. Forth: Is my right hon. and learned Friend surprised that the Minister did not dwell on that point, if only to justify the fact that he wishes to make an arbitrary rule, forcing the permanent secretary to retire prematurely and when at the peak of his powers—a rule that he has not even sought to justify—but that he is apparently quite satisfied for a Lord Chancellor to continue indefinitely after that arbitrary age limit?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: My right hon. Friend once again puts his finger on an important point. If I can have the Parliamentary Secretary's attention, there is an equally important point to develop.

We are told that the Department will not be in conformity with any other. In other Departments, everyone is obliged to retire at 60, but one of the Lord Chancellor's primary functions is to deal with members of the judiciary, who do not retire until the age of 70.

Although it is unlikely that a permanent secretary would carry on until the age of 70, some flexibility is desirable to ensure a continuity of knowledge in the Lord Chancellor's right-hand adviser on a vital part of his role. To remove that possibility on the grounds of consistency is merely doctrinaire.

I would be the first to acquit the Lord Chancellor of any charges of those characteristics. I have not regarded him as one of the more dogmatic or doctrinaire members of the Government. I hope that he is not embarrassed that I put that to his credit. I hope that he will listen and reflect carefully on the two important points that I have mentioned, which I hope to develop later in our debates.

We should give the Bill a Second Reading only if the Minister gives us some indication of a fair wind and favourable consideration for my sensible amendments, which would in no way damage the ability of the Government to run the affairs of state effectively.

4.40 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I follow the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) about agism. Many of us are concerned about the political correctness that is creeping into every aspect of the new Labour Government. Such political correctness is being severely questioned not just in the House, but throughout industry and in legal circles. It is wrong and contrary to common sense for a senior official—a permanent secretary—to be told that he has to retire at 60 when he will be dealing with crucial issues relating to the appointment of judges, who will sit to the age of 70.

The Lord Chancellor's Department is different and the legal profession and the legal system are different. They form a separate pillar of our constitution. We must be particularly aware of the special position of the law. We have already seen the new Labour Government playing fast and loose with our constitution. They govern by press release and spin doctor, bypassing the House of Commons. That is a slippery slope to perdition.

I have great respect for the Minister and I have had a great liking for him for several years. He has been sent here to do the bidding of his master in another place, as he has to. If he spends a little time analysing what he is proposing, he may have severe doubts about it.

Considerable concerns were expressed about the proposal as recently as two days ago in *The Guardian* by no less a correspondent than Mr. Marcel Berlins, who was for many years the doyen of legal correspondents at *The Times*, which was when I first got to know him. We used to study together in the same library in the late 1970s. He now has a column in *The Guardian*, called "Writ Large". He says:

> "Slipping quietly through Parliament is an extraordinary Bill, whose sole purpose is to make one Permanent Secretary to a Government Department equal to all other Permanent Secretaries."

I agree with Mr. Berlins' concerns. He continues:

> "So the Lord Chancellor's Department has finally fallen to egalitarianism."

However, these proposals are of much greater concern.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Will my hon. Friend continue with that article from *The Guardian*, which refers to the possible appointment of Mr. Ian Burns as the next permanent secretary at the Lord Chancellor's Department? Will he explain how the proposal could have the ludicrous consequence of Mr. Burns being appointed at the age of 59 and having to retire at 60?

Mr. Hawkins: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to some of the other concerns referred to in that article. I have no idea whether Mr. Berlins is right—perhaps the Minister will tell us when he winds up—but he says that the Bill has become known informally in the Lord Chancellor's Department as the Ian Burns Bill. I have no knowledge of Mr. Burns and I do not seek to comment in any way on the ability of a gentleman of whom I had never previously heard, but if Mr. Berlins is right—and I know him to be one of the best-informed newspaper legal correspondents—there could be ludicrous consequences.

In all aspects of public life, able people are being forced to retire when they can still perform many years of public service. That is happening purely because of doctrinaire policy. The Government are following the mistakes of many previous Labour Governments and imposing doctrinaire age limits contrary to common sense.

I share the great concerns raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire. It has been suggested in the past few days that the role of legally qualified clerk in magistrates courts is to be split from administration, which does not require them to be legally qualified. Several of us tried to raise our concerns at the time of that statement, although some of us were unable to do so. I hope that the Minister will reassure us about the feeling that the new Labour Government believe that lawyers should be excluded from positions of responsibility.

I detected a considerable anti-lawyer feeling among Labour Members in the previous Parliament when we were in government and they were in opposition. I know that the Minister does not share that feeling because he is

a former law lecturer and a qualified lawyer. I also know from his service on the legal committee of the European Parliament that he has always taken a serious and balanced view of legal issues. I urge him to examine the prejudices of some of his party colleagues, who seek to exclude lawyers.

The Minister has said that there is no reason to suppose that all future incumbents of the post will not be lawyers, but this may be the beginning of a slippery slope, with the Government seeking to prevent lawyers from holding the post. It is important that the holder of the post should be a lawyer. If not, at least my right hon. and learned Friend's amendment should be accepted in Committee to ensure that, if the post holder is not a lawyer, his deputy must be. I am sure that the Minister will concede that there are many specialist aspects of the job that require a lawyer.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire referred to the growth in the Government legal service, in which I have many friends, including some former members of my former chambers. He did not dwell on one of the most important innovations of the previous Conservative Government, which is relevant to today's debate—the creation of a Minister in the House of Commons to answer for the Lord Chancellor's Department. That post was held by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) in a distinguished manner for several years. It was also held by Mr. Jonathan Evans, the former Member for Brecon and Radnor. We all look forward to his return to the House at the earliest opportunity.

The post was an important innovation and the fact that we can have this debate today shows how wise the previous Government were to ensure that there was a Minister in this House who could be questioned. If we did not have such a Minister, legislation such as this Bill could have been slipped through on the blind side without proper parliamentary scrutiny. I am delighted that we have an opportunity to have this debate in which the Bill, the role of the Government legal service and the role of the officials at senior and junior level who serve in it can be analysed.

We must consider carefully whether it is right for the Bill to be passed in its present form—or at all. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire has said that he would be happy for it to go through if amendments were accepted. I believe it would have been much wiser for the Bill not to be introduced and for no age limit to be imposed. It would be better, as has been the case for many years, for the permanent secretary to be a lawyer. I am concerned that the Government have got the matter wrong, and I hope that they will reconsider it carefully.

4.50 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): We welcome the Bill because it will sweep away an anachronism and open up the post of permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor to a far wider field of candidates. I say that notwithstanding the points made by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), who enjoys an enviable reputation in this House and elsewhere.

We would like the Minister to address two points. First, I hope that the Government are committed to an independent and politically impartial civil service which is free from party political favouritism. A new permanent secretary is likely to be appointed in or before April 1998. The previous Government made significant changes to the method of selecting senior civil servants. How will the new permanent secretary be selected?

Secondly, I have noted in Sir Peter Middleton's recent report that he states:

"A single Government Department should be responsible for all aspects of civil justice".

Do the Government intend to introduce proposals for a single Ministry to be responsible for and to co-ordinate the proper administration of justice, which is now conducted by various Departments of state?

4.52 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): I declare an interest in that, over the years, I have sat as an acting metropolitan stipendiary magistrate and I now sit occasionally—I might like to sit rather more often—as a recorder of the Crown court.

I have a fair amount of notes in front of me on points that I intend to make—[*Laughter.*] I want, however, to start with an instinctive reaction to the Bill, which is of slight unease. I understand that it is fashionable to undervalue and downgrade lawyers. It is a sport taken up by many, but it has not yet been banned in this country, and it is gathering force. I am sometimes sad that the lawyer is so undervalued and I hope that the Bill will not contribute to that trend.

In parallel to that thought is the observation that, nowadays, when there is talk about the administration of justice, the courts and the law, one hears more and more comments such as, "It must be more efficient. We must have more productivity. How are we going to save money? How are we going to do things faster?" More and more of that kind of comment comes out as the 1990s develop, and less and less emphasis is placed on the integrity of the lawyer and on the importance of lawyers and the legal Departments. I have put that point badly, but I think that the Minister will understand what I am saying. I worry that too much emphasis is placed on the twin evils of productivity and efficiency.

What is the Bill about? It tells us that in future the permanent secretary need not be a lawyer. The Lord Chancellor has said that his Department needs as its official head the most able and experienced candidate available. Many of us cannot disagree with that comment. The Lord Chancellor goes on to say, however:

"I and my predecessors have been well served by a distinguished line of Permanent Secretaries, who have ably managed the organisation".

I looked up the records and discovered that eight permanent secretaries have served in the Department over the past 110 years—one for as long as 29 years, which is not bad going. Is the Lord Chancellor right, however, to say that in future permanent secretaries need not be lawyers of 10 years' standing?

The Minister has said that the choice available to the Lord Chancellor is severely limited. How wide is the field? How limited is the choice? Is it too small? From how many people would the Lord Chancellor be able to choose if the previous criteria applied? Have previous appointments been unsatisfactory? What is prompting the change?

[Mr. Humfrey Malins]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made a telling intervention in which he referred to the unique nature of the Lord Chancellor's Department. It is indeed unique. It is a Department with which I have had much contact over the past few years. To me and to people outside the Chamber, it is essentially different from the other great Departments of state. It is different in that I think of it not so much as part of the Government machine as a Department with real independence and independent thinking. It is an important safeguard in our democracy.

The permanent secretary of the Department must have close links with the top judiciary, with recorders, with stipendiary magistrates and with justices. Indeed, he probably has close links with the head of judicial appointments the Department. The head of judicial appointments is an important person who, I am sure, has close daily links with the permanent secretary. Is it not right that the permanent secretary has come from the same stable of lawyers? Is the Bill, by implication, an attack on lawyers and on the Government legal service? Will it be seen as a slap-down for the many distinguished people who should be considered for the post of permanent secretary because of their qualifications and their legal experience?

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire rightly referred to the parallel problem relating to the recent proposals for magistrates clerks. The Bill divides the functions of the magistrates clerk between the administrative functions and the functions of sitting as a clerk. The Minister will know—this is an important point not unconnected with the Bill—that as the years have gone by, magistrates clerks have felt deeply undervalued. The proposal to hive them off so that one is involved entirely in administration and the other in court sitting is a mistake. My right hon. and learned Friend was quite right on that point.

Mr. Ruffley: Would my hon. Friend care to elaborate on the ridiculous agism involved in qualifying to be a magistrate? Is not the agism that is so apparent in the Bill also apparent in the structure of the magistrates court system? Does he share my experience of many constituents who wish to become magistrates being told that, due to their age, they cannot contribute to work on the Bench?

Mr. Malins: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He is absolutely right. I was coming to the provision concerning the age limit of 60. It is as though that is a magic figure. Yes, the provision is an example of agism, which is reflected, in a sense, throughout the system. Many of us have encountered constituents who cannot become magistrates due to their age, although they would contribute immensely to the general well-being of the magistrates court system and the administration of justice. That is wrong. When will people realise that a few grey hairs can be quite important?

Mr. John M. Taylor: Hear, hear.

Mr. Malins: My hon. Friend says hear, hear; there are no grey hairs on him. For my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) it is another matter.

Mr. Taylor: That is because some of us do not have any hair at all.

Mr. Malins: To be serious, though, there is merit in the point. There is no difficulty in involving people over the age of 60 in the posts. Does any hon. Member think that, suddenly, at the age of 60, people lose their ability? Many distinguished lawyers have reached their peak not in their forties or fifties, but in their sixties or even later. Many examples are known to us of outstanding men and women who contributed greatly to the law when they were well over 60. I cannot see a justification for imposing a strict age limit of 60 bearing in mind the men and women who have served as permanent secretary over the past 100 years. Can the Minister tell us how many of them served with great distinction well beyond the age of 60?

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Should not the Government and the Minister be considering whether to raise the upper age limit? We know that we have an aging population and, as time goes by, it will become increasingly difficult—unless people are prepared to work to a later age—for the working population to sustain those who are not working. The proposal is a retrograde step. I would much rather the Government said that they were raising the retirement age for all permanent secretaries.

Mr. Malins: My hon. Friend is right to say that we have an aging population; people are living longer. Is not the fact that a growing proportion of the population will be in their sixties, seventies or, indeed, eighties an argument for enabling people to carry on, with just a degree of flexibility, rather than stopping them in their absolute prime at the age of 60? I for one cannot understand why the Bill is so inflexible.

I return to my general theme. It worries me that, as we move towards the close of the century, what I might describe as the independence of lawyers—the pure law—is being watered down. Instead, we are fed a diet of administrators, those who seek productivity in the magistrates court system and those who are urging it to be more efficient—whatever that means. How does one become more efficient? We should be concentrating on the administration of a good, fair and accessible criminal justice system.

As I have already said, the reforms that are to be imposed on magistrates courts will make access to justice and the courts much more difficult for the ordinary person, who will find everything that much more remote. That argument spills over to the issue of the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor. Over the years, the post has been filled by a lawyer and I believe that that should continue always to be the case. People outside the House consider the Lord Chancellor's Department somewhat separate from other Departments: a unique and independent Department for which they have always had the utmost respect. If the Bill is passed unamended, there will be less respect for that Department. There is a real danger that some of its integrity, qualities and great

achievements will not be repeated. Indeed, there is a danger that those qualities and that integrity will disappear in the years ahead.

5.4 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): In considering the matter before us I looked at the proceedings of the Bill that became the Supreme Court Act 1981—the original Bill. It immediately caught my eye that the then Attorney-General, Sir Michael Havers, said:

"with the exception of the right hon. and learned Member for Warley, West (Mr. Archer), whom I welcome, the Opposition Benches are deserted."

For those who believe that the House of Commons has somehow declined over the years, here we are as living proof that that is not so. Whereas the Opposition Benches were deserted in 1981, my hon. Friends and I are living proof that the present Opposition are vigorous in their determination thoroughly to scrutinise what is before the House. Conversely, on this occasion, the Government Benches are all but deserted; in fact, I do not see one authentic Back Bencher on them.

Such a parliamentary observation—if I may indulge myself—leads to the question why the Bill before us was not introduced in the other place in the same way as the 1981 Bill. Perhaps the Minister will wish to comment on that. On the face of it, to me as a layman—I speak as one of the few non-lawyers to contribute to the debate, so I hope the House will forgive me any infelicities—the Bill would have been an ideal Bill to introduce in another place. Although I am sure that the House would want to scrutinise it properly—I cannot imagine why there would be any problem in our doing so—why was not the Bill introduced in another place? That is a matter for the Minister to return to.

The proceedings on the 1981 Bill are very interesting. It must be relevant for us to reflect on that Bill since the Government are seeking to amend it. The then right hon. and learned Member for Warley, West, the Opposition spokesman, said:

"We all accept that there are certain tasks that should be carried out by those who are qualified by the nature of their training and experience . . . it would be unfortunate if, in our anxiety to avoid restrictive practices, we overlooked the qualifications and experience that are necessary for a particular job."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1981; Vol. 4, c. 199-210.]

Those words are at the kernel of the argument before us.

I gather that the Minister might ask us to consider other stages of the Bill's proceedings this very day. I would be reluctant to accept that, although I shall of course follow the lead of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell). If he were satisfied that the Government were prepared to give due recognition to our legitimate and constructive points, we might allow the Bill to make rapid progress. I hope that there is no suggestion that there will be an attempt to ram the measure through the House without proper deliberation or due regard to the reasonable amendments that my right hon. and learned Friend wishes to move. We shall return to that point later.

The question that the Minister must answer on the point about qualifications was raised by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) and, in a different way, by my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins). Are we being told that there is an insufficient supply of suitable candidates under the existing regime? Is it suggested that somehow we cannot find a suitable permanent secretary for the Lord Chancellor's Department within the existing restrictions? However, I have not heard the Parliamentary Secretary suggest that.

The Bill seeks to overturn a satisfactory arrangement, but the Parliamentary Secretary has not told us why. It would be one thing if he had argued that there were not enough trained and experienced lawyers within the Department, but I do not believe that that is what he was arguing. The Bill has come out of the blue, seemingly for the sake of dogma, political correctness or some grotesque uniformity across Government. We need more on that point before some of us can be satisfied.

I shall not labour the point that the Lord Chancellor's Department cannot simply be lumped in with the other Departments of Government and treated the same, because many of my hon. Friends have already covered it. However, as a layman, I always thought that the Lord Chancellor's Department was special and separate, not least because—I am now treading on difficult territory—in much of its work it fulfils not just a quasi-judicial role but a judicial role. To that extent, the Department must be marked out as separate.

Mr. John M. Taylor: My right hon. Friend prefaced his remarks by saying, with false modesty, that he is not a lawyer. He is of course one of the Opposition's sharpest minds and best speakers. He singled out the Lord Chancellor's Department as having a special role, and I endorse that point. The Lord Chancellor is the President of the Supreme Court and the most senior judge in England. That distinguishes his Department from others.

Mr. Forth: I hope that my hon. Friend will catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that he can elaborate on his inside knowledge of the Lord Chancellor's Department. We will want to take his words into account when we decide how to vote on the Bill.

Mr. Ruffley: Clearly, some offices of state require a specialist knowledge for the discharge of their functions. For example, the Home Secretary requires a knowledge of the law and we have seen a long succession of Home Secretaries who have been lawyers of one type or another. That is because solicitors and barristers understand the nature of the work of a Home Secretary. Is not what is true of the Home Office also true of the Lord Chancellor's Department?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I regularly remind the House that interventions should be brief. That rule is particularly apposite in the case of hon. Members who are seeking to catch my eye. I am sure that they would not wish to run the risk of repeating themselves.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) is right. Do we want to lump the Lord Chancellor's Department in with the department for youth, sport and ballet dancing, or whatever it is called these days? There is no need for restrictions on appointments in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, but we are all agreed—unless the Parliamentary Secretary dissents—that the Lord Chancellor's Department has special characteristics that justify the

[Mr. Forth]

restrictions originally placed on the qualifications of the permanent secretary. The Parliamentary Secretary has given no reasons for departing from those restrictions and the hon. Gentleman must satisfy us on that point before the Bill goes much further.

My main point, which I cannot state strongly enough, is about agism. I have long felt that it is pernicious, unnecessary and unfair for arbitrary and mandatory rules to be placed on retirement age. That is even more true of the insupportable mandatory retirement age of 60 for the civil service. I have had the honour and the privilege of working closely with senior civil servants, which has been one of the greatest and most pleasing experiences of my life. I was always shocked and disappointed when, at the age of 60, civil servants at the peak of their powers were forced into arbitrary retirement by a rule that was devised long ago in completely different circumstances.

Now we have the Parliamentary Secretary saying, with almost a straight face, that he will remove the welcome latitude that has hitherto been available to the Lord Chancellor's Department for the sake of blind uniformity with the wrong-headed rules applied to the rest of the civil service. This should be an opportunity to follow the good example of the Lord Chancellor's Department and change the rules for the rest of the civil service. We should abolish arbitrary, uniform and mandatory retirement ages, certainly for the civil service and preferably for everyone else. As a small first step, we should retain the existing flexibility in the Lord Chancellor's Department, and use it as a basis for changing the rules for the rest of the civil service.

For those reasons, we need more convincing reasons than we have heard so far to persuade us that the Bill is worth supporting. Because I am in a generous mood today, I am prepared to go along with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire, who made a perhaps over-generous offer to the Parliamentary Secretary. I will be guided by my right hon. and learned Friend, who has wide experience of such matters, but I hope that the Bill, however small a measure it may seem, will not be railroaded through the House today as if it were of little or no account. I hope that the Opposition's comments will convince the House that the Bill deserves thorough attention and a co-operative and flexible approach from the Government before it goes any further.

5.16 pm

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): When I first found out that the Bill was being brought before the House, my concern was that we had had no notice. I appreciate the need for urgency, which was mentioned by the Parliamentary Secretary, but the Bill involves a substantial change to an important appointment which has been notified in only one press notice from the Lord Chancellor's Department dated 29 October 1997—the same day that the Bill was published. My inquiries into the Bill's background, beyond what is covered by the press release from the Department, show that no consultation has taken place with any of the legal bodies, such as the Law Society, or with the union for senior civil servants. In effect, the Bill has no history, and no ministerial statement preceded it. Those facts raise concerns about the motives behind the Bill.

This afternoon, it has become clear that the reasons behind the Bill stem from the need of the Lord Chancellor's Department to find a replacement for the present permanent secretary, who intends to retire. That is not a good reason to change an established practice.

I shall now turn to the history of the role that the permanent secretary has played. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) noted, apparently no one was present on the Labour Benches when the Supreme Court Act 1981 was discussed by the House. If the then Opposition had bothered to be present, they would have learnt that the post of permanent secretary was treated together with judicial posts under the Act. I quote from the Supreme Court Act 1981.

"A person shall not be qualified for appointment to any office in the Supreme Court listed in column 1 of any Part of Schedule 2 unless he is a person of any description specified in relation to that office in column 2 of that Part."

At the top of the column, we have the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor and Clerk of the Crown in Chancery, and there is a requirement that the permanent secretary should have a 10-year general qualification in the law. It will be noted that that is similar to all the other major offices which are there listed, including the Official Solicitor, the Queen's Coroner and Attorney and Master of the Crown Office and Registrar of Criminal Appeals, the Registrar of Civil Appeals and the district judge of the principal registry of the family division. I take that back—he needs only five years' qualification within the relevant profession. A substantial number of persons and offices are listed which require a lesser period of legal general qualification.

I am mindful of everything that the Minister has said, but a detailed explanation is required as to why an accepted practice which was not opposed by Labour in 1981—indeed, no Labour Member was present when it was accepted—is to be arbitrarily overturned. The measure has not been introduced in the House of Lords, as one might have expected—if only because the political and legal head of the Department concerned is the Lord Chancellor. One might say that it is the Lord Chancellor's cookie and we should have liked to hear his explanations at the outset.

The Minister has said that he wishes all the Bill's stages taken in the House to be taken in one go. Subsequently, it will go to the Lords for formal rubber stamping. I do not share that view and I would like to explain why. First, I wish to refer to the nature of the office. A great deal has been said by my hon. Friends on the subject, but it bears repeating. *[Laughter.]* One of the reasons why it bears repeating is that, effectively, we are having a dialogue with the Minister only. It is a pernicious development when it is assumed that a Bill can be rubber-stamped by this House without a proper debate.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Those Labour Members who are laughing will need some points repeated, because they were not in the Chamber when they were originally made. They only came into the Chamber after my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) pointed out that not a soul was on the Government Back Benches except one hon. Lady substituting as a Parliamentary Private Secretary. I think she was not present in a Back-Bench role—perhaps she

will rise to speak and prove me wrong. All the others laughing so happily have not been listening to the debate, and my hon. Friend's remarks will be new to them.

Mr. Grieve: I agree entirely, and that is why this is a proper subject for a full debate.

I have sympathy with the difficulty which the Minister says the Department faces. From 1885—when a permanent secretary was first appointed—until today, the scope of the Lord Chancellor's Department has changed beyond all recognition. It is an important Department of State and, in addition, a major spending Department. I am mindful of that, and of the fact that it has spawned a substantial bureaucracy. The Department has many employees and has an exceptionally important function in reconciling the administration of justice with the conduct of the Government, in a way that is peculiar to this country. The Department is particularly important to the way in which we conduct our business in this country.

I realise that there are potential difficulties in finding administrators who may be able to deal with the scope of the administrative operation of the Department. But one must reflect that, as the Department has grown in past years, there has not been much difficulty in recruiting permanent secretaries of the highest calibre to discharge their office, as the Minister has acknowledged. What has not been fully explored is the role of the permanent secretary in his quasi-judicial function. That is why he is listed along with all the other quasi-judicial functions in the 1981 Act.

The permanent secretary is the most important adviser to the Lord Chancellor on a number of matters, including appointments and the way in which the judiciary might better be able to function. It is of the utmost importance that, in carrying out this role, he should be able to advise the Lord Chancellor fully on a range of matters and to have good connections and contacts with all parts of the legal profession.

In my experience, previous permanent secretaries have involved themselves in the professional life of the Bar or the Law Society. I am well aware from my early days at the Bar that—either in office or retirement—a number of permanent secretaries took the closest possible interest in the way in which the profession operated, which clearly enabled them to have an enormous amount of input into the problems of the administration of justice in this country. It is proposed in the Bill that, in future, that involvement will not be a requirement. I am anxious that, in those circumstances, the Lord Chancellor will not receive the best advice for the discharge of his judicial functions.

Comments have been made to the effect that the legal profession is wishing to feather its own nest and keep its monopolies. But if I can give an analogy, it would be thought odd if the job of principal medical adviser to the Government went to someone who was not a doctor, on the basis that his functions were mainly administrative and that he could receive input from others. In such circumstances, he might just as well be an administrator as someone grounded in medical science. If that were the case, there would be an outcry and public disquiet on the subject.

Similarly, it is important that the Lord Chancellor is seen to be receiving from the permanent secretary—or someone occupying a position close to the permanent secretary—the relevant legal and professional advice to enable the Lord Chancellor to discharge his burdensome duties. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) suggested that this could properly be done by an amendment which simply stated that, if the permanent secretary was not legally qualified and did not fulfil the criteria set out in the 1981 Act, his deputy would be acceptable.

I am bound to say that that is sensible and ought to commend itself to the Minister. If it does not, I will have serious reservations. There has been no consultation. The professional bodies concerned have not been asked for their views, and it has been suggested that this matter is so straightforward that it requires only a rubber stamp.

Mr. Hawkins: My hon. Friend refers to the lack of consultation, which tends to support the concern expressed in *The Guardian*—to which I have referred—that there is a distinct whiff of this matter being pushed through on the blind side by the Government in the hope that no one will notice. A suggestion for the Government's motivation was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) in an intervention. Is there not some truth in what he said?

Mr. Grieve: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree. I have no comment as to the capacity or otherwise of any individual to fulfil the responsibilities of the office. I would not wish to do so. I reiterate, however, that simply to introduce such legislation because of a one-off difficulty without considering the totality of the picture is a mistake.

Before concluding, I must say one or two words about the agism. I do not want to go into it in great detail, as I have already intervened on the matter and do not intend to repeat myself. I would say, however, that, if one accepts that the nature of judicial and quasi-judicial offices is somewhat different from that of the other offices fulfilled in the civil service, and if one differentiates them from that service—which I believe the Government would be at pains to do—one immediately confronts the fact that the retirement ages are entirely different. That was for a good reason because it was considered that experience was of such importance in such offices that it overcame the need for the normal retirement age.

I have expressed the view that, as time goes by in the next decade, we will be confronted increasingly with the fact that we are forcing people to retire too early. That in itself is an argument why the present proposal is not a good one. Even if I were not dealing with that wider issue, however, I would still be concerned as to why it should be thought that the retirement age of the permanent secretary, who fulfils a completely individual role, should be tied to that of the rest of the civil service.

Everything that emphasises the somewhat different nature of the Lord Chancellor's Department from that of other offices of government is an important reinforcement of the independence of its role. I hope that the Minister will take on board the points that have been made. I shall certainly defer to what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire wants to do at the conclusion of the Second Reading debate.

I can only express a certain amount of disquiet, and the hope that in future there should at least be a few weeks for adequate consultation and reflection. A feature of this

[Mr. Grieve]

Government and the way in which they introduce legislation is that within 48 hours or a few days of its coming before the House it is back to be debated. That really is not good enough. We should be supplied with an opportunity for reflection and not simply hi-jacked and expected to say, "Well, it isn't very important. We can let it through." All legislation is important and the Bill is particularly so.

5.31 pm

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I have ever suffered from the debilitating weakness of being able to see both sides of an argument, something that never troubled the last Prime Minister but two. On the one hand, in dealing with judges and the Bar, not least silks and the Law Society, one is dealing, dare I say, with a client group that can occasionally show a slight tendency to believe that no one but one of its own understands its business. On the other hand, it can in theory at least be a distortion to career progress in the Lord Chancellor's Department for senior civil servants in the Department to know that some of them could become permanent secretary and some, by statute no less, could never do so.

The question of a Department of State having a client group can incidentally, in certain circumstances, lead to false expectations on the part of that group. On seeing one of its own in place in a Ministry, the client group can half believe that he or she will represent it in government. To the contrary, he or she is most likely to be the bringer of denial on behalf of the Department to his or her fellow professionals in the client group. I experienced that as a solicitor and junior Minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department—I was the first person to hold that office—and, indeed, as a member of the Law Society. To some extent, I think that I was a disappointment to my client group.

One wonders how far one might extend the provision. My hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) referred to a senior medical post—overtly medical in qualification—being occupied by someone who did not possess that qualification. What would happen to a Ministry of Defence whose permanent secretary was a retired general? Would it work? What about a large landowning, proprietor farmer as permanent secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, a senior policeman at the Home Office, a diplomat at the Foreign Office—perhaps that happens, as there is a read-across between the permanent secretary at the Foreign Office and the diplomatic service—a consultant at health and an airline pilot at transport? The better view is that such appointments are not always happy.

That brings me to an analogy drawn from an exchange of correspondence that I had with the British Legion, which urged on me with highly responsible reason and argument that there should be a Minister for veterans. I was doubtful if such an appointment would bring them the advantages that they worthily desired, because such a Minister would inevitably represent the Government to them, not them to the Government.

At this point, I will not digress on what I consider to be the anomalous position of the Attorney-General, who is a very senior member of the Government and also head of the Bar [HON. MEMBERS: "Go on."] I am tempted, but not that tempted. The House will be interested, as always, in an historical insight.

In the 1590s—400 years ago—the House of Commons debated the role of the Clerk of the Crown in Chancery for four solid days, coming to the conclusion—I have this faithfully—that the Clerk of the Crown is our own particular officer. You may think, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that there is a sort of mystery in all that. On the other hand, you may think that that is not a very heroic piece of definition. Four hundred years later, we still do not seem to have the measure of this man. That may not be entirely surprising, since he has been around since at least 1331 as Clerk of the Crown in Chancery certainly. I think Parliament may be a little frightened of him. He has the endurance of a Hapsburg and also has important duties relating to writs of summons to Members of this honourable House.

Finally, I agree with all that has been said about age discrimination, and I cannot understand why the measure was not introduced in the House of Lords. I feel that the Lord Chancellor's Department is particularly interesting. The office of Lord Chancellor has endured for about 1,360 years—it is almost as old as the monarchy and certainly far older than Parliament.

In an earlier time, not least in the time of the Tudors, the Lord High Chancellor of England was easily the most powerful man in the country. He usually combined his judicial duties with one of the two archbishoprics and was chief executive as no Prime Minister these days is. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House will be familiar with the great 18th-century nostrum. Searching for reasons to explain why England was stable, the great jurists of the day, such as Montesquieu and others, came to the conclusion that England was stable because it separated the three fundamental functions of the state—the judicial, the executive and the legislative. It was a very elegant conclusion.

Mr. Hawkins: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the dangers of the proposal, introduced by the Minister with so little scrutiny, is that it may be part of the slippery slope to merging those three pillars of state? That accords with much that we used to hear from Labour Members in opposition—the hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) often used to argue this—about lay people with no legal qualifications becoming not only magistrates but judges.

Mr. Taylor: Yes, one might as well have a vote on an aircraft to choose which passenger should be the pilot.

The 18th-century conclusion that England was stable because of the separation of powers was one that the examiners seemed to want to arrive at irrespective of the evidence. There was precious little separation of powers then, and to this day the Lord Chancellor has in his person the presidency of the Supreme Court, the speakership of the House of Lords, the helm of an important Department of State and a very senior place in the Cabinet.

The nostrums of 200 years ago were completely mistaken, but they had a mightily important consequence: the form and framework of the constitution of the United States of America, a country that is extremely difficult to govern because it has separation of powers and the Government cannot control spending.

I had the enormous, humble privilege of serving in the Lord Chancellor's Department, where I acquired deep respect for the civil servants, and not least the permanent

secretary, from whom I had immensely capable help and warm and friendly assistance throughout my three and a half years there. They remain some of the happiest days of my life and if, by some fluke, there are any present who are connected with the Department, I mind not at all that they should know.

I end as I began: I can see both sides of the argument, but I think that I shall follow my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) into the Lobby. How many times we shall go into the Lobby I am not sure. How much progress we shall make on the Bill is not known to me. As an Opposition Back Bencher, I do not control the timetable, so I shall merely take my opportunity, summoned as ever by bells, to register my vote in what will probably be several Divisions, before we can all go home, very much later tonight.

5.42 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): The Minister was surely right to say that the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor's Department was an important post, but he was surely wrong to give the impression that the change in the Bill was merely technical. It is a change in an important matter of principle.

Part of the logic behind the Bill is set out in what Conservative Members consider to be an inadequate press release. The reason for the change is couched in the language of managerialism. I know how popular managerialism is on the Government Benches, but I fail to understand how the Government can ask us to support the change, when the reason given is that the limitation that they want to get rid of

"is no longer appropriate to what over the years has become a major Department of State with a large budget and staff and a wide range of responsibilities."

From the words in the press release, one might believe that the job described was counting paper clips or dealing with stationery orders or staff matters. That is part of the permanent secretary's job, but it is not the whole of it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) ably pointed out, the permanent secretary has quasi-judicial functions. We have heard precious little about that from the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), quoting Mr. Marcel Berlins, explained the other, partial logic behind the Bill: the levelling down and egalitarianism with which we are so familiar from the Government. It does not serve the interests of justice or the proper and efficient running of the Department.

Whatever the logic—I use the word loosely in connection with the Labour party—it is perfectly clear that the Minister has not done his homework. The many excellent speeches by Conservative Members have exposed the many flaws in his argument. The Minister is laughing, but he must answer some important questions. Why has the First Division Association, according to the Library, not been consulted in any way? That is a disgraceful way to treat senior public servants. The Government talk about listening, caring, compassion and giving, but they are not giving much time and attention to the senior civil servants who work for them.

Mr. Malins: My hon. Friend refers to consultation. Has there been any consultation with the judiciary, the presiding judges at the various Crown court centres, the Bar Council, the Law Society or any of the other leading bodies that might be interested in the Bill?

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we need answers from the Minister.

Mr. Hawkins: On the lack of consultation with the First Division Association, it should be noted that the former head of the FDA in the previous Parliament, Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean, is now a Minister in another place. One wonders what she thinks of her ministerial colleagues failing to consult her former trade union.

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Perhaps Baroness Symons would like to make her views known, assuming that the Minister without Portfolio will let her. I understand from the Library that the Law Society was also not consulted. We are entitled to ask that there should be consultation on legislation with parties that have a legitimate interest.

There is another problem that the Minister has not dealt with: the disincentive to able lawyers in the civil service who want to stay there. We have heard nothing from the Minister about recruitment and retention; I hope that he will address that. It is difficult enough as it is to recruit top-rank lawyers to serve the Government, because there is a great discrepancy between the pay that a top lawyer can expect in the Government's legal service and in the City.

When I worked in the City as a solicitor, it was not uncommon for first-rate legal brains to become partners of law firms and earn more than £200,000. Labour Members may think that that is obscene, but since their conversion to market principles they should at least acknowledge that we get what we pay for. If that is the going rate for first-rate lawyers in the City, we know that we will have a problem in getting the best in the Government legal service. That problem will become worse if the Bill is enacted, because many able young lawyers in the Government legal service will feel that they have lost the right to obtain the top job in the Lord Chancellor's Department. As my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath said, the Bill is anti-lawyer.

The Attorney-General has just taken his seat. The Government are doing so badly that they have had to bring in the big guns.

What work has the Minister done, with his officials, to see what effect the Bill will have on the recruitment and retention of first-rate legal ability in the Government legal service? If he has not done such work, will he undertake to do it today and report to the House accordingly?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) put his finger on the main issue when he said that the permanent secretary has a job like no other in the Lord Chancellor's Department. Legal specialism in such a Department is important. I have seen how civil servants' lack of legal ability can damage the quality of legislation. I have played a part in government for a lot longer than the Minister. I was a special adviser at the Home Office. I was shocked to see how policy failures emanated from the failure of senior Home Office civil servants, dealing with legal matters, to grasp legal concepts. That led to policy failures with which Ministers had to grapple.

[Mr. Ruffley]

For example, problems were caused by unit fines under criminal justice legislation, and legal definitions in the new age travellers legislation were not thought through. A good permanent secretary should have a handle on such subjects. At the end of the day, he is responsible for the quality of legislation that is put in draft for Ministers' approval. There are many clear examples of where a failure of legal understanding on the part of senior civil servants damages the quality of a Department's output.

When we consider all the evidence, we must conclude that the Bill has not been thought through, and many questions remain. The Opposition would prefer the Bill to be dropped, but my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), being a generous man, has put forward a sensible amendment which addresses most of our concerns. If the Government have any sense, they will accept the amendment and ensure that we have what we all want—a proper functioning Lord Chancellor's Department. I thank my hon. Friends for their interventions and I urge support for my right hon. and learned Friend.

5.54 pm

Mr. Hoon: The debate has been characterised by what can only be described as a gaggle of lawyers articulating some concern for other lawyers' vested interest in securing particular positions. That was described as vigorous opposition. Perhaps the Government should be grateful because if that is vigorous opposition, they may not have much to worry about. If Opposition Members have to spend such a disproportionate amount of time on this modest measure, they may not have time for other matters, so at least I am assisting the Government's programme by occupying hon. Members who might have been usefully employed elsewhere.

Mr. Grieve: Has not the debate revealed the Government's lack of scrutiny of the measure?

Mr. Hoon: On the contrary: it has revealed Opposition Members' failure to do their homework. The single point that has been repeated throughout the debate is that the Bill removes the important qualification that the permanent secretary should be legally qualified.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: In which year did that requirement first appear?

Mr. Hoon: The requirement has been in place for a considerable time. However, if it is so vital that the permanent secretary should be legally qualified, why did the previous Conservative Government, in which the right hon. and learned Member held such a distinguished position, change the rules to allow, for the first time, the office to be occupied by someone who was not a lawyer? Conservative Members have referred many times to the importance of that position being occupied by a lawyer, but it was their Government who changed that. That is why it is remarkable that Conservative Members have not done their homework as thoroughly as they might have before spending so much time on this issue.

I shall deal briefly with the more sensible points that have been made during the debate, but there were not too many. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) achieved the ultimate in hyperbole when he said that the Government were playing fast and loose with the constitution and that that was the road to perdition. Clearly, the road to perdition for a lawyer is taking away the opportunity to compete freely with others in order to secure a position, because that is what we are debating today.

It is remarkable that lawyers should spend so much time, presumably without any extra payment, arguing that cause. Looking at the distinguished qualifications that have been on display today, I am surprised and disappointed that they were not earning a much better living otherwise than in the Chamber.

However, one or two sensible points have to be addressed. In particular, there was the suggestion that the deputy to the permanent secretary should be a lawyer. That is simply not practical, not least because it bears no relation to the way in which the Lord Chancellor's Department, or any other Department, is organised. It may seem a long time since the Government were elected in May, because we have had such success in achieving our manifesto commitments, but Opposition Members who have had some experience of government have clearly forgotten how their Departments were organised. At least three former Ministers are sitting on the Opposition Benches, and they should remember that hardly a Department has a deputy permanent secretary. These changes have been under way for a considerable time.

I can assure the House that knowledge and experience of the legal and judicial culture are bound to be desirable qualities for someone in this position. All things being equal, it may be attractive to have a candidate who possesses such qualifications. In any event, the successful candidate will either have to possess those qualities or show a capacity to acquire them.

Furthermore, apart from the fact that the Department's legal adviser works directly to the permanent secretary, the senior management of the Department is always likely to include people who possess those qualities and who can support the permanent secretary or the Lord Chancellor.

This remarkable effort by the lawyers on the Opposition Benches to preserve the qualification of lawyer for this position is a farrago of nonsense.

Mr. Malins: The Minister would not have said that the current choice is severely limited unless he had something with which to back up his statement. How wide is the field? What is the choice currently available?

Mr. Hoon: I referred to senior civil servants. Very few senior civil servants currently possess the requisite qualifications. Some lawyers have those qualifications, and anyone who has worked in the Department for the requisite period is similarly qualified—the hon. Gentleman overlooked that aspect, but I shall pass over that. As Conservative Members have emphasised often enough during the debate, someone with suitable seniority and experience will necessarily have had long experience of government. We would look to a very senior figure when considering an appointment to this position. Very few senior figures in Whitehall at present are suitably qualified.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman. He said that very few people in government service have the requisite qualifications.

Mr. Hoon: No.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: He said that very few people in the Lord Chancellor's Department—

Mr. Hoon: No, I did not.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman keeps shaking his head and saying that he did not say that. I wrote down, "very few who have the requisite qualifications": those were his ipsissima verba. I am sure that he will explain them, and when he does so, will he say briefly what the requisite qualifications for this post are and where he expects to find them?

Mr. Hoon: Few senior civil servants with the requisite experience are qualified under the existing statutory rules. That is the problem which the Department faces in securing the appointment of someone who has the various qualifications that Conservative Members have set out.

Conservative Members are caught by their own logic. If their logic is that it is vital to appoint someone who is so senior and experienced that he could hold such a responsible position in the Lord Chancellor's Department, they must recognise that it is important for the Department, when seeking such a figure, to be able to attract candidates from the widest possible field and not be limited to people who have either a legal qualification or the requisite five years' experience in the Department. Those are the two qualifications that the right hon. and learned Gentleman asked me about.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: It is not good enough. The hon. Gentleman has just referred to two qualifications that candidates may not have, but he has not listed any of the qualifications that are required. He will certainly have done his homework, so he should be able to spin off at least five qualifications that he has in mind.

Mr. Hoon: This modest, technical change to the rules is important, because it will allow us to appoint the permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department from among people with suitable qualifications and background who are presently eligible to be considered for the post of permanent secretary in any other Department. We should be able to choose someone with the requisite qualifications for leadership and management of a large public or private sector organisation. They should be familiar with, and ideally have direct experience of, the processes of government, and have proven experience of strategic policy development and implementation.

The Bill removes the requirement of a legal qualification. I do not believe that it is necessary to have such a qualification. The previous Government established that in their legislation. It is remarkable that the House has been detained for so long by Conservative Members putting up bogus arguments. They voted for such a measure during the previous Parliament.

Mr. Grieve: I want to understand fully the hon. Gentleman's position. The 1990 amendment to the original Act provides that, as an alternative to a lawyer, someone who has been in the Lord Chancellor's Department for five years can be considered. The present measure will allow a senior civil servant who has not worked in the Lord Chancellor's Department and is not a lawyer to be appointed. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the 1990 amendment was introduced so as to be mindful of the need for the appointee to be familiar with the way in which the Lord Chancellor's Department operated if the person concerned was not a lawyer? Will the hon. Gentleman deal with that issue?

Mr. Hoon: I distinctly heard the sound of ground changing: that was not the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's earlier remarks. Having been reminded of the issues we are dealing with, he is now shifting his argument significantly. If he will forgive me, as he could not get it right the first time, I shall not pay any attention to his second, C-minus effort.

I have answered all the serious questions save one. The matter of retirement age much concerned Conservative Members. The current provisions will allow the permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department to retire on the same basis as any other permanent secretary in any other Department. The permanent secretary will have the same opportunity as any other to continue after 60 in appropriate circumstances. There is that flexibility; former Ministers and any Conservative Members who have had experience of government know that full well. They are trying to put up a smokescreen: it is a charade.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman said that former Ministers know full well that there is flexibility to allow people to continue after 60. I confess to less than complete knowledge of that. Will the hon. Gentleman tell us in two sentences what the rules are and how long any permanent secretary can continue?

Mr. Hoon: The rules are flexible and can be agreed with the person concerned in the light of the circumstances to which Conservatives Members referred. If someone in that position still fulfils a valuable role in the Department, that person can, by agreement, be allowed to stay on after 60. All this modest proposal will do is put the Lord Chancellor's Department on the same footing as any other Department.

Mr. Forth: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. It has been suggested that the Minister may seek to deal with further stages of the Bill today. It would help us if we knew before he resumes his seat, and before you ask the House for its view on Second Reading, how the Minister proposes to deal with this matter procedurally, and whether he is prepared to accept the reasonable amendments that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) seeks to make to the Bill. I hope that you agree, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that would help the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman knows that that is not a matter for the Chair. It is a point of information to the Minister.

Mr. Hoon: I dealt with the right hon. Gentleman's reflections on the vigorous opposition that he claimed the

[Mr. Hoon]

official Opposition were now providing, although perhaps he was absent. I said that I was surprised that this debate amounted to vigorous opposition. If there had been vigorous opposition, the right hon. Gentleman would have noticed that the Order Paper showed that the measure was to go through all its stages. That has been available for the past week for Conservative Members to consider. Unfortunately, the vigour of their opposition does not appear to have manifested itself until rather late this afternoon.

Mr. Forth *rose—*

Mr. Hoon: No, I will not give way.

Indeed, the vigour of Conservative Members' opposition manifested itself so late in the day that amendments were submitted only at the eleventh hour.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that that is not good enough. He has acknowledged in the House today that I alerted the Lord Chancellor last week to the suggestion that there should be a deputy secretary. That is the subject which we seek to debate today. and that is the matter on which we seek a careful and considered answer. I have tabled a manuscript amendment, which I hope will be selected for debate. It would be very helpful if the Minister would calmly and courteously answer the questions put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and me about his attitude to a proper debate on this important issue.

Mr. Hoon: I was not in any way casting any doubt on the right hon. and learned Gentleman's integrity; I was simply reflecting on the suggestion of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) that he was somehow a representative of some new, vigorous Opposition. Had he been as vigorous as he claimed, he might well have been able to check how long the proposal had been on the Order Paper—and, indeed, why his colleagues in the Opposition Whips Office had not sought to suggest, for example, in the light of today's debate, that the matter should be referred to a Committee.

The Government received no representations whatever suggesting that that was what the Opposition wanted. In fact, until this afternoon's filibuster began, we had assumed—

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm that, if a filibuster had been taking place, you would have ruled the speeches out of order? It is not right for a Minister Crown to describe speeches made by hon. Members as a filibuster, because that is not allowed in the Chamber.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The Chair has not heard anything so far that has been out of order. My advice to the House is that there should be a little less provocation on both sides.

Mr. Hoon: I was simply entering into the spirit of things, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise if any Conservative Members have been offended by the robust nature of my remarks.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 202, Noes 5.

Division No. 84] **[6.12 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Betts, Clive
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chaytor, David
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Goggins, Paul
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jennifer *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
McAvoy, Thomas
McDonagh, Siobhain
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Milburn, Alan
Mitchell, Austin

Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Palmer, Dr Nick
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Watts, David
White, Brian
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jane Kennedy and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Colvin, Michael
Grieve, Dominic
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Nick Hawkins.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—[*Janet Anderson.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That this House will immediately resolve itself into a Committee.—[*Janet Anderson.*]

6.24 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I shall be brief. Hon. Members who were not here for the earlier debate will be interested to know what this one is about. It is about the fact that the Government are seeking to get their business through the House in a day. I have made it perfectly clear that we are not seeking to prevent that: the official Opposition did not vote against Second Reading. We seek a sensible debate on two points, the first and most fundamental of which I gave the Lord Chancellor notice of a week ago. The Minister acknowledges that. I have tabled a manuscript amendment and hope that I can persuade you to call it, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am a bit confused about whether we are in Committee or debating whether to go into Committee. I do not know whether other hon. Members would own up to the same confusion. Could the matter be clarified?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman were in the House paying attention to our proceedings he would know. The occupant of the Chair should not be required to inform him of the position. A motion has been moved about immediate committal. That is the Question that is before us.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Hon. Members may feel that they are being kept longer than they expected. We wish to have a serious debate on two questions. The first basic question in the Bill is whether the House should agree that the Lord Chancellor's permanent secretary should not necessarily be a lawyer, not necessarily even a person with a legal qualification, who has grown up with the work of the Department and who has been there for at least five years. While we would be prepared to give that a fair wind, we would be prepared to do so only if the important continuity of knowledge from the Lord Chancellor's Department to the Lord Chancellor about his judicial functions and all functions connected with them and in relation to the practical administration of the courts were protected.

That could be done by ensuring that when the Lord Chancellor's permanent secretary is not a lawyer or someone with five years' experience, there would be a deputy secretary in the Department to fulfil the necessary functions. He would be a lawyer of 10 years' standing; and there must be scores, if not hundreds, of such people with developing seniority in the Government legal service. That would mean that the Lord Chancellor would have a senior person who carries the respect accorded to someone who holds a notified post to whom he could turn on these important aspects of his duties. That would help to ensure that "can-doism", which I am sure would never take over in the Lord Chancellor's Department, is balanced by a respect for law and legality. That is the serious debate we seek.

It is sometimes difficult for a manuscript amendment to be called. I am sure that the point has been grasped by the 220 hon. Members who are here. I hope that the Minister will give me a fair wind by saying that the Government will support a debate on my amendment if the House goes into Committee. Of course, that does not bind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I should be grateful for a helpful answer to that from the Minister, and then we can decide whether we should support our continuing to scrutinise the Bill in Committee tonight.

6.29 pm

Mr. Forth: The House is debating whether this matter should immediately be considered in Committee, and anyone who was in the Chamber during the Second Reading debate—which virtually no Labour Member attended—would realise immediately that the problem that confronts the House is the Minister's persistent refusal to give proper answers to the questions asked by Opposition Members during the debate.

The motion must be viewed in the light of what went before. Surely we cannot expect automatically to agree a

[Mr. Forth]

deviation from the normal procedures of the House without taking some account of what happened previously; that would be entirely unreasonable. That, I suggest, is why procedures allow for the short debate on which we are now embarking, in which I suspect several of my hon. Friends wish to participate, because we must now consider, as a House, whether we are ready to consider the matter in Committee now, as opposed to at a future date.

The difficulty is not confined to the poor quality of the Minister's response. It also revolves around what my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) said earlier about the difficulties that may or may not arise from the ability of the Committee—were it to sit—to consider amendments. I say that specifically because my right hon. and learned Friend has been over-generous to the Government and to the Minister. I am sorry to say that, but I think that he has. He has made them an offer that I could just about go along with, were it to be agreed to.

I would prefer that we be allowed to reflect on what was said on Second Reading—on the points so eloquently made by Opposition Members and on the Minister's bumbling and rather arrogant replies. We should reflect on those and consider, in the light of the Second Reading debate, which has just finished, whether we want to amend the Bill. We should consider whether to take the package generously offered by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire or, as I would prefer, to seek to move separate amendments, dealing separately with the key points that emerged from the debate.

Those key points were, first, the proposed lifting of the restriction on the recruitment of a permanent secretary and, secondly, the point skated over by the Minister as though it were of no consequence—the age limit on the service of a permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department.

Those matters may or may not go together. I am starting to think, reflecting—as I have had only a few moments to do—on the Second Reading debate, that those matters can and should be dealt with separately. However, were the Minister to be prepared to be reasonable to the line taken by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire, my colleagues might be prepared to go along with him. It would not be proper, however, in the light of the debate that has taken place, for matters such as that to be rushed into.

The Minister made the procedure sound like a minor technicality. He tried to spoof the House as if to say, "Why are Conservative Members here? Why are they taking part in the debate? How have they the nerve to come to the Chamber to raise these points and waste my time?" I believe that I sum him up not unfairly.

That will not do. The Minister may be relatively new in government, but he must learn that the Government are accountable to the House of Commons and that that accountability expresses itself in debate, in the mature consideration of points and in the consideration of amendments that are tabled now, rather peremptorily, on the Floor in Committee, or in Committee upstairs.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does my right hon. Friend agree that among the points that the Minister signally failed to answer was the point about the fact that the Bill was not introduced in another place? As several of my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, we would expect that to be the procedure in the case of legislation that directly reflects on the position of the Lord Chancellor. That is another matter that needs reflection while the House is considering whether it is prepared to have the Bill pushed through without proper debate, all in one day.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is right, and he reminds me that that was yet another argument that received, as far as I recall, no response from the Minister. I should have thought that, as a courtesy to the House, he might have explained why he and his colleagues in the Government had decided to table discussion of the Bill on a Thursday evening, to slip it through—probably while no one was noticing—and then to dust it off and send it to the other place.

That is not the way that we should deal with these things. This is a serious matter—a matter of substance. We recognise that. The number of my colleagues who have attended the debate, the thought that they have given to the Bill and the thoughtful speeches that they have made are ample evidence of that.

The matter that we are now considering—which we should not rush, either—in the light of what has been dealt with so far today, in the light of the debate on Second Reading, which some hon. Members now in the Chamber have just sat through, is whether it is reasonable and proper, in parliamentary terms, in scrutiny terms, in legislative terms, for us to rush into Committee without a chance for reflection. Should we do so without a chance, if I even dare suggest it, for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire to have discussions with the Minister, to discover whether something might be worked out?

I sensed that there was some common ground, in spite of the Minister's bluster. I sensed that the reasonableness of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire might have provided the basis of an agreement; but can we do that on the hoof? I doubt it. I doubt that we shall get a quality of outcome from this matter if there is an attempt to rush the Bill through.

These are serious and weighty matters, which the House must consider, and I hope that due consideration can be given. As you have gathered, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remain to be convinced that we are ready for the matter to be dealt with now, as opposed to at a reasonable future date. Unless I am much more convinced than I have been by the Minister, that would remain my view. I hope that he will reflect on that and realise that we are—I probably speak for all of my colleagues—in a mood to be helpful on this if only he will help us. That is all I am asking. It is not an unreasonable request.

The Minister must learn that even the present Government must understand that there is give and take in this process. We are prepared to give rather a lot, but we should like some latitude from the Government on this matter, perhaps starting now.

6.36 pm

Mr. Malins: My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is right; the Minister gave no help on Second Reading. He was utterly dismissive of many of our arguments. Specifically, we repeatedly asked what the nature of the consultation was and whether presiding judges were consulted. Were the Crown court circuit judges, the Bar Council or the Law Society consulted? Who was consulted? We received no answer.

Throughout the debate, no Member was on the Labour Benches, with the honourable exception of the hon. Member for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), whose contribution we might have welcomed, as he has a distinguished career in the law. Perhaps he had been told to keep his mouth shut and not to say a word. As it was, questions such as those that I would have expected a man of his intelligence to ask were asked by Conservative Members, and not one received a proper answer. That is why I share the sentiments expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst.

6.37 pm

Mr. Hoon: We are debating whether this matter should proceed immediately into Committee. We have heard a great deal of lyrical objection, especially from the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who I think will become celebrated, as a result of his contribution to the Second Reading debate, as the author of the phrase, the debate that we have had today indicates that we have a vigorous Opposition. Unfortunately, the vigorous Opposition on that occasion only amounted to the five Members who passed through the No Lobby, so the official Opposition managed to get fewer Members through the No Lobby than the number who spoke on Second Reading. Perhaps Conservative Members were so exhausted by the process of the Second Reading debate that they could not summon the vigour to walk through the No Lobby.

It is important for the House to realise that the official Opposition have had notice of our intention to deal with this matter for some seven days. During those seven days not a single representation was made from any Opposition Member, through the usual channels or in other ways, indicating any objection to this matter being dealt with through all its stages today. I urge the House to accept the motion.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: With the leave of the House. That is not good enough.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot speak for a second time in this debate.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Parliamentary Secretary made no attempt to respond to the key issue in the debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows that that is not a point of order. He cannot make a second speech on that basis.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House will immediately resolve itself into a Committee.

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I must inform the House that I have not been able to select the amendments tabled in manuscript form.

Clause 1

QUALIFICATION FOR, AND TENURE OF, OFFICE

Motion made and Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.—*[Mr. Hoon.]*

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I will respect your ruling, Sir Alan, and the House must abide by it. When Bills are taken at short notice, it is difficult for the House to obtain the best procedural value from the time available to us. We now have this clause stand part debate, and I intend to use it to focus again on the important questions that the Parliamentary Secretary utterly failed to answer.

There was one point on which the hon. Gentleman gave an answer, but I do not agree with it. I shall make this point to explain why hon. Members are being asked to stay here on a Thursday evening. If the permanent secretary is not a lawyer and does not have five years' experience in the Department, there is a great deal of sense in having somebody else in an acknowledged senior position who does. I hope that the Parliamentary Secretary will address that.

Mr. Hoon: I said on Second Reading that there is a senior legal adviser who works directly to the permanent secretary. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will find that such a figure, who is responsible for giving legal advice, is a sufficient satisfaction of his concerns.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am not satisfied with that. The very first point made by the Parliamentary Secretary when he was replying to the earlier debate was that this was simply a gaggle of lawyers articulating concern for a vested interest. I am a lawyer, and I am articulating concern for an interest, but it is not the interest of any private sector lawyer. I am concerned about the interest of 1,000 members of the Government Legal Service who hitherto have held this post for sound constitutional reasons.

We modified it so that, on occasion, somebody who had spent five years in the Department might be able to take their place as permanent secretary. The Government now find that inconvenient, presumably because they do not have anybody who has spent five years in the Department whom they are willing to appoint, or because they wish to go outside Government to find somebody who does not fall within the requirements of the current statute—that may not be wholly stupid, and, as I have said, we are not seeking completely to block this Bill.

However, it is important—the Parliamentary Secretary has not attempted to deal with this—that the Lord Chancellor should have at his right hand somebody with deep and practical experience of the workings of the Department, who has experience of close co-ordination

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

with the legal system generally, and the legal profession and the courts in particular. There is absolutely no reason why such a person should not be appointed as a deputy secretary.

To say that, in government generally, the post of deputy secretary has been faded out in recent years, is a truism. We have moved towards a more flexible system of senior management. However, this is an exceptional situation, and I would not have thought that the Government were in principle so rigid and hidebound as to be unable to look for a small but exceptional answer to a substantial but exceptional problem.

It is nonsense to say that no deputy secretary can be appointed in the Lord Chancellor's Department because there are no deputy secretaries in any other Department. It is not true. The Government could do that, and, if they are refusing to do so, they are being obdurate.

6.45 pm

I shall have to read *Hansard* to find out the Parliamentary Secretary's exact words about a senior legal adviser to the permanent secretary. We are asking for a senior legal adviser not to the permanent secretary but to the Lord Chancellor; somebody who has right of access to the Lord Chancellor's room in the same way as the permanent secretary. The permanent secretary can enter the Lord Chancellor's room on any occasion—it would be a strange Lord Chancellor who would not let that happen—to alert him to matters that may concern him. A deputy secretary should have that power. Why should he have that power?

Mr. Hoon: Since we are proceeding in this manner, I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will accept that, for a considerable time, it has not been the responsibility of the permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department to give legal advice to the Lord Chancellor. That advice is given by a specialist unit within the Department, which is there to give such advice. As I explained at some length earlier, the permanent secretary is no longer required to give advice to the Lord Chancellor.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: That may be so, but it does not begin to answer the question. Obviously, I have not been the Lord Chancellor and I have not been junior Minister to the Lord Chancellor, although I dare to say that it was partly on my recommendation that such a post was created. I was Solicitor-General for five years, and I did all the Lord Chancellor's business in the House.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Will my right hon. and learned Friend take note of the fact, although the permanent secretary may not be the mainstream legal adviser to the Lord Chancellor, he has an important role in judicial appointments? When I was junior Minister to the Lord Chancellor it was made perfectly clear that I was excluded from any part of the functions relating to judicial appointments. The permanent secretary has that important role, and it is far from being administrative.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I agree with my hon. Friend, and he has anticipated the very point that I was developing. The Parliamentary Secretary should recognise, if he does not already from his six months or so in the Department, that we are not just talking about legal advice. We are talking about the long-standing comprehension of the legal system and the judiciary. As my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) said, we are talking about judicial appointments, probity in government, things that can go wrong, and the opportunity for effective feedback from within the Government Legal Service.

The Government will not have to be in power for very long before they will find that Ministers who are not lawyers will want to do things which may not be consistent with the law. Civil servants who are "can do" civil servants will be appointed. In our parliamentary democracy, it is the Opposition's duty to point out such things, and I can recall occasions on which the Labour party in opposition pointed out that we had appointed people with too much of a "can do" attitude.

Without revealing too many secrets, I can say that, in my role as a Law Officer over 10 years, I had to make it perfectly clear that the law had to be respected. Having done that, the law was respected. Lady Thatcher, when Prime Minister, was absolutely scrupulous in her adherence to the law. Naturally, she would push the bounds of government as far as possible in the direction that she thought was politically correct, but, once she was advised that that was as far as she could go, she would reign back and find another way to do what she wanted, if it was lawfully doable.

I am sure that that would also be true of the present Prime Minister, and that he would have a deep respect for the law. However, if there is to be a deep respect for the law, the proprieties and the general understanding of how our constitution works, there must be somebody who can advise on that.

The Lord Chancellor has an immensely busy job. He is far busier than earlier Lord Chancellors. There is now an administrative overlay for the management of the courts, which was not the case previously. It is largely because of that administrative overlay that the Government want the opportunity to appoint somebody from outside the ranks of the profession—indeed, if necessary, outside any significant experience in the Lord Chancellor's Department.

The Minister said that the previous Government had already prepared the ground, by changing the requirement for a lawyer of 10 years standing to somebody who had spent at least five years in the Department. He is now trying to sweep that away, so that somebody who has spent little or no time in the Department, and therefore has no feel for matters, can have the Lord Chancellor's ear. It is obvious from the Minister's earlier replies that the senior legal people will have to go through the permanent secretary, who will filter out information before it reaches the Lord Chancellor.

Even more important—as I imagine that the person concerned will be someone of great probity who will listen carefully to his legal adviser—that person will not have on-the-hoof experience. There will not be someone close to him who will hear the bells of propriety ring. Someone with an acknowledged position in the Department should be involved. Surely the Minister agrees that there will still be senior lawyers in high places in the Department.

What is needed is someone with an acknowledged position who has the ear of the Lord Chancellor as of right. Of course, out of courtesy that person would inform the permanent secretary before he went to see the Lord Chancellor—but he would be entitled to insist on going if the permanent secretary happened to say, "I do not think you should do that," or, "I would much rather you didn't do that." That is the sort of remark that tends to be made. It is the sort of remark that is made to lawyers. Of course, what tends to happen is that people do not really want too much legal advice, as it might not be terribly helpful.

The matter is important on two levels. First, there is the immensely practical point that the Lord Chancellor should have immediately available the benefit of the long-standing, consistent experience of the profession, the judicial system and the legalities, in the knowledge that, as holder of the office, it is his duty to act a watchdog.

If we were debating this issue with the Lord Chancellor now, I am sure that he would say that he could do a great deal of that for himself; but he would not be so arrogant as to say that he could do it all. The Minister, on the Lord Chancellor's behalf, should not be so arrogant as to suggest otherwise—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps I am doing the hon. Gentleman an injustice. However, that is why I say that he should look more carefully at the matter than he has so far shown himself willing to do.

The second point relates to the Government legal service. I am not arguing for lawyers qua lawyers; I am arguing in favour of members of a highly honourable branch of the public service—the Government legal service—who have probably spent all their working lives from their late 20s or early 30s to retirement advising Government, while being conscious of the legalities, the difficulties, the management problems—

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way again. Does he accept that there is nothing in the Bill to prevent any lawyer from the Government legal service—or, indeed, any lawyer from any other position—from applying for the job and being considered alongside others who apply?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Of course. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that that is a point of any weight, he has not understood my argument. Rather than repeat it, I invite him to read it in *Hansard*.

The 1,000 members of the Government legal service are attracted by the fascination of the work. The sheer level of legal work likely to be seen by a young man or woman in the service outstrips that which is available to all but a tiny handful of the Bar and solicitors' professions. No lawyer would gainsay that. Those lawyers in their 20s, 30s or even 40s in the Government legal service see matters of a weight and complexity that most private practitioners never see. Lawyers grow up in the service over many years, and build up a body of wisdom.

When lawyers move on to the administration of justice and the courts—about which my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull knows so much because of his previous ministerial position—they know how a court case is run. Over the years, they have discussed the problems with the judges. When they become administrators, they bring with them a great background of real knowledge, just like those in the upper reaches of the health service who do a certain amount of administration.

Of course, sometimes people do not want to do that—they want to do clinical medicine and nothing else. However, it is hugely valuable to the health service when people with real hands-on experience of medicine go into management. That is how the Government legal service should work. There is a genuine danger, which, sadly, the Government are so far failing to recognise, that much of that will be lost or diminished if my sensible—indeed, friendly—suggestions, which I mentioned to the Lord Chancellor in advance of this debate, are simply brushed aside.

There is also a point about agism. I do not think anyone has given much thought to that; I admit that I had not until a week ago. However, the more I thought about the valuable service given by permanent secretaries who have run one, two or three years over their time, the more I thought how stupid and doctrinaire it would be to get rid of them.

That point deserves a sensible and reflective answer from the Minister—at least an answer along the lines, "As a junior Minister I cannot commit the Government here and now, but I will discuss the matter carefully with the Lord Chancellor. I promise that, even if this Bill passes all its stages in the House tonight"—as, I freely admit, I had anticipated—"I will consider the matter carefully before it goes to the other place, and at least seriously consider tabling amendments to meet the serious, sensible and reasoned objections that have been made."

I very much hope that, when the Minister replies to the debate, I will receive a carefully considered and reflective answer to what I believe are genuine points of substance.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Even as we debate clause stand part, some emphasis should be laid—not least for the record—on the importance of judicial appointments when considering the qualities and qualifications that the permanent secretary to the Lord Chancellor should hold.

As I said earlier, judicial appointments are scarcely a matter for the Executive. When I was a junior Minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department, it was made abundantly clear to me—not in a menacing way, but in an entirely logical way—that my remit was to shadow the Lord Chancellor in all matters in the House of Commons, save judicial appointments. I was excluded from judicial appointments—quite rightly. They are personal to the Lord Chancellor and his immediate advisers.

Judicial appointments do not relate just to the odd judge here or there—they relate to the appointment of the Lord Chief Justice, the Master of the Rolls, the President of the Family Division, the Vice-Chancellor, the entire High Court bench, the Judicial Committee of the House of Lords, every recorder and deputy recorder in England and Wales, the circuit bench and every magistrate in England and Wales, save in Lancashire.

The appointments are an enormous task, and a gigantic responsibility. Part of our security in the United Kingdom is based on our belief in freedom under the law. The law is very important, and the public's confidence in the law is extremely important. That public confidence begins with the Lord Chancellor's appointments.

The Lord Chancellor probably has as many appointments in his gift as any other Minister. However, the eternal weariness for any Lord Chancellor begins once—or sometimes twice—a year, when he must preside over the incredibly difficult and delicate matter of

[Mr. John M. Taylor]

determining who shall be appointed Queen's counsel and take silk, thereby reaching the zenith of a Bar career. What joy for those who take silk, and what utter dismay for those who are not chosen! In making the appointments, the Lord Chancellor has the most thankless role imaginable.

7 pm

Members of the Bar certainly do not regard that assessment of their worth as being administrative. Even now, I suggest that it is right for hon. Members to bear in mind the many roles of the Lord Chancellor. He sits in the other place—in a role equivalent to yours, Mr. Lord—on the Woolsack, he performs a thankless task in making judicial appointments, and he runs what has become a most controversial Department. As many hon. Members have pointed out in this debate, the Lord Chancellor's Department has changed from being a relatively small office with a relatively small range of functions into a very big Department that has in many ways entered the very centre of political argument.

Legal aid has become a much-argued-over benefit. It is part of the welfare system, and has its boundaries. People are disappointed if they do not receive a legal aid grant, and they cannot discern fairness in the system if they see someone else receive one. When I was a junior Minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department, at least half of each Question Time was taken up with often argumentative and frequently aggressive questions on legal aid.

When questions were not on legal aid, they were on the provinces and jurisdictions of magistrates and magistrates courts committees. The magistracy has been in the United Kingdom for 600 years and is independent of the circuit court system. It is the jewel in the crown of the judicial system. Appointments to the magistrates' bench are delicate and crucial. There have been political arguments over the political complexion of magistrates, and questions such as, what does the balance of the magistracy look like? Are there more of these, or more of those? Those matters are worth arguing and debating.

Magistrates are fiercely independent.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: My hon. Friend is most eloquently making the key point. He has referred to the legal aid system and to the magistracy, and undoubtedly he is about to refer to the court system. If one is to administer those systems, one must understand them. Does he not agree that, without having available a senior person who has been through the mill and understands it, the Department will be diminished?

Mr. Taylor: I could not agree more with my right hon. and learned Friend, because he has stated the case exactly.

I realise that legal aid is run by a semi-independent agency. Nevertheless, that agency spends taxpayers' money, and it is now spending about £1.5 billion per annum, which is a very serious sum. In many ways, it is to be welcomed that the new Labour Government are developing thoughts that might have existed in a previous Administration—but I will not go over that ground.

The Government are showing some fortitude in dealing with the legal aid system, which must be dealt with. The Comptroller and Auditor General has qualified the accounts of the Lord Chancellor's Department in the past six years. The Department's accounts have not passed muster, because there has been no evident control over legal aid spending.

I wanted primarily to deal with the permanent secretary's role in judicial appointments, but, in doing so, I have enlarged my case by saying that he holds an important political and mainstream governmental role, with heavy judicial responsibility. Rightly, the qualities of the person to do the job are closely scrutinised. In this debate, I hope that Conservative Members have been trying to scrutinise those qualities closely.

Mr. Burnett: For the reasons that I have already given on Second Reading, we support the Bill. Nevertheless, I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to the two points that I made in that debate. For his recollection, I will repeat them, but in precis form.

The first point was on the method of selection for the permanent secretary. The second point—for which I quoted from Sir Peter Middleton's recent report on legal aid—was to question whether the Government are minded to concentrate the various judicial functions and the various Departments into one separate, distinct Ministry.

Mr. Hawkins: I expressed some concerns about the Bill in the Second Reading debate. The longer debate on the Bill continues—both on Second Reading and in Committee—the more my concern increases. I paid generous compliments to the Minister in the earlier debate, but I may have overstated them. He has certainly failed to respond to the very legitimate concerns—particularly on the lack of consultation—raised by my hon. Friends and myself.

As the Minister may recall, I served on the Bar Council for seven years, until 1995, when I became a parliamentary private secretary. For the last three of those years, I was on the council's general management committee, which acts as a type of inner cabinet. In my remarks earlier today, it had certainly not occurred to me—the fact was revealed later, by questioning by Conservative Members—that there had been no consultation on the Bill with any of the legal professional bodies. The Bar Council has not been consulted, the Law Society has not been consulted, and even the civil servants' trade union has not been consulted.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Ministers have been caught out practising government by press release, by spin doctoring and by anything other than the normal democratic process. I am particularly pleased that Conservative Members have followed up on some of the attacks made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) on the Government's attempt to push through the Bill without debate.

The manner in which the Bill has been passed will be very much noted among the professional bodies, who will regard it as a straw in the wind, or perhaps even more, showing the extent to which they will have to watch the Government—as Conservative Members intend to watch the Government—every step of the way. Ministers are constantly attempting to evade debate and to move it away from the Chamber and from those of us who have been democratically elected to scrutinise legislation, and to pass on the blind side as many measures as possible.

The Government have clearly been caught out trying to pass this Bill on the blind side, but they have not succeeded—thanks to the vigilance of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire and other hon. Members. The Bill's passage has provided a classic example.

I hope that the Minister will do the House the courtesy of addressing the very serious issues raised by hon. Members in this debate. We still have absolutely no answer to many questions. What about the issue of people who have given long and loyal service in the Lord Chancellor's Department and who will be unable to continue doing so beyond a purely arbitrary age limit? Such a limit is clearly against the public interest, and the House will have to hear the Minister's answer to that question.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor)—who served as a Minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department in the previous Government—has raised a much more serious issue, which I will not repeat, and could not deal with half so well. It is absolutely essential that the person who holds the job of permanent secretary should himself have the legal experience necessary to discharge the functions of advising the Lord Chancellor on judicial appointments—of which there are so many, as my hon. Friend said—or, at the very least, have a deputy who has legal qualifications or long experience of service in the Department.

How can someone who has pursued an administrative career path but has no experience of the specific mysteries and specialist concerns of the law possibly discharge the function of properly advising the Lord Chancellor? All hon. Members who have some experience of the legal profession are bound to be worried about that especially serious concern. We want the Minister to deal with such points in his first response to the clause stand part debate.

Finally, I had hoped for better from the Minister than the high-handed approach which I know has come to him from those in other offices in the Government. Perhaps the Minister without Portfolio has been sending him pager messages, telling him to dismiss all the relevant points that my colleagues have been making, but I hope that at long last we shall hear a proper answer.

Mr. Grieve: I want to pick up a point that arose earlier. The Minister suggested dismissively that because in 1990 there had been an alteration to the previous requirement that the permanent secretary be a lawyer, the arguments being advanced by Opposition Members about the likely changes that the present proposals would make to whether the permanent secretary was a lawyer were irrelevant.

Mr. Hoon: Bogus.

Mr. Grieve: The Minister is excelling himself in the courtesy he extends to Conservative Members. The matter clearly requires even more prolonged discussion.

An alteration was made in 1990. I should be interested to hear what position Labour Members took on it. It was possible, in certain circumstances, to enable a civil servant who had experience of the Department, but who might not be legally qualified, to become a permanent secretary. I do not disagree with that for one moment, because, as I told the Minister on Second Reading, I accept that the Department had a complex role and that its administrative role had grown considerably. I said that I had some sympathy for the underlying problems that might have led to the Bill being introduced.

Far from seeking to rubbish the Bill, I appreciate that there may be sound reasons for it. I should like the Minister to present them to us, but I am at a loss to understand why the Government are attempting to rush it through the House without consultation.

The permanent secretary shoulders a great burden of responsibility. It is all very well our being told that the legal adviser will always be there, but he is there to advise on legal matters. The Minister knows, or should know, given his qualification as a barrister, that, although the legal profession may have its detractors, one of its strengths is that, within a relatively small compass, there is a large pool of talent comprising solicitors and barristers who are capable of going on to hold high judicial office. It is one of the principal roles of the permanent secretary to identify them, to maintain good links with the judiciary and the relevant professional bodies and to advise the Lord Chancellor about them. I infer—I am sure that the Minister will confirm this—that the legal adviser has absolutely no role whatsoever in that. Therefore, our arguments are relevant.

It is not acceptable to introduce the Bill simply because it is administratively convenient. The previous arrangements spelled out in the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990, as amended, state, significantly, that the first consideration is whether a person is legally qualified and that the secondary is to ascertain whether a person, if not legally qualified, has at least five years' service in the Department. I have examined the statute carefully.

Any changes should not be rushed. I am concerned about the absence of consultation, but I am perhaps even more concerned that such a Bill should be rushed through simply because it happens to be administratively convenient in November 1997. I ask the Minister to bear in mind the points that I have outlined and to treat Opposition Members with the courtesy that I hope we have extended to him.

Mr. Hoon: I have been asked to consider the arguments carefully. I hope that hon. Members agree that I set out carefully at the beginning of Second Reading why it was necessary for the Government to introduce the Bill at this stage. If there were any doubts about the need to change the present restrictions, the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) put them very well. He said that the position of permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department was an important political, mainstream Government role. He outlined the responsibility that anyone who holds such a position should have.

Opposition Members have confirmed me in my view that it is vital that the Lord Chancellor's Department should have the same opportunity to select a permanent secretary as is available to other major Departments of State. In making that selection, the Lord Chancellor's Department should not be constrained by rules that have long since lost their function. In my careful presentation at the beginning of Second Reading, I rehearsed the history of the matter. I am sorry that Opposition Members did not listen with sufficient care and attention as I pointed out that the problem surrounding the question of legal advice has long since passed into history. I hope

[Mr. Hoon]

that that deals satisfactorily with the issue raised by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell).

7.15 pm

The right hon. and learned Member also referred to the retirement age. Once again, the Bill is designed to bring the position of permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department into line with that of every other permanent secretary. It will be possible for the permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department to stay on by arrangement beyond the age of 60, with the agreement and co-operation of the head of the civil service. That is exactly the position of every permanent secretary.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Will the Minister clarify what difference the Bill is making? How is the Bill changing the situation?

Mr. Hoon: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman said, the formal retirement age is to change, but he was anxious that we should recognise the skills and qualities of someone who might attain the age of 60 but who still has a considerable contribution to make to the country. I am clarifying for the right hon. and learned Gentleman the position of the permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department and, indeed, that of any other permanent secretary. In the circumstances that we are debating, it will be possible, by arrangement, for a person to continue in post.

The hon. Member for Bolton, West and Torridge—

Mr. Burnett: Torridge and West Devon.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman made two points. First, the Government remain committed to an independent civil service. The selection process will be the same as for other permanent secretaries. Secondly, we shall consider the Middleton recommendation for a single Ministry of justice. We are already considering Sir Peter Middleton's recommendations, but I have to say that the Government have no present plans to implement the particular recommendation to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

I was greatly entertained by the arguments of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), but I should perhaps not rise to the bait. He was more moderate in Committee than on Second Reading. The constitution seems likely to survive the shock that the modest change introduced by the Bill might cause it. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's willingness to watch the Government every step of the way. I assure him that in this Parliament he will have plenty of watching to do as we ensure that the promises made to the electorate in the Government's manifesto, on which Labour was elected overwhelmingly—including to the Blackpool seat that he formerly occupied—are carried out.

I cannot avoid dealing with the argument put forward by the hon. Members for Surrey Heath and for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) that we are rushing the Bill through on the blind side. They both know full well that it was thoroughly advertised—as is all business in the House—on the previous Thursday. Only very recently have the Conservatives decided to prolong the debate. The proposal is modest and I commend clause 1 to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Order for Third Reading read.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the Bill be now read the Third time.—*[Mr. Pope.]*

7.21 pm

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I shall be brief, because my points are easily understood. I regret that the Minister, who, I believe, has a degree from Harvard, has answered only one of my questions and has not sought to respond to the detailed points that I put to him about the role of a deputy secretary in the Department.

I am grateful to the Minister for answering about the ability of a permanent secretary in any Department to continue in office after the age of 60 if the public interest requires it. To some extent, his helpful answer has allayed my concern. However, he must know that he has not addressed my detailed and formidable arguments about why there should be someone in the Department with a particular responsibility and the opportunity to have the ear of the Lord Chancellor to deal with the many non-administrative matters that are profoundly important to that unique office, should the Lord Chancellor require it or should a senior person realise that he needs it and that it is his duty to give it.

I very much hope that that point will be pursued further in another place and that the Government will reflect more closely on my detailed arguments before the Bill reaches another place. I hope that they look sympathetically, albeit not in this House, on amendments such as those that I have suggested.

7.23 pm

Mr. Forth: The debate has covered substance and style. It is right that the substance of the Bill should be considered. I say that it should be, but that requires the participation not just of the Opposition, carrying out their duty to scrutinise proposals, but of the Government, personified in this case by the Minister. I regret that he has failed to satisfy us on the key issues that we have raised time and again. He has given scant regard to our arguments of substance about the nature of the position of permanent secretary in the Lord Chancellor's Department, the role of that individual and the qualifications required. He has failed to persuade us that the matter is as simple as he has argued, however brief, peremptory and superficial those arguments were.

The Minister has not deal at all with the mandatory age of retirement of the permanent secretary. That may appear to be a subsidiary detail, but its importance ranges beyond the measure before us, because it sends out a signal. We are being asked to approve the idea of a mandatory civil service retirement age of 60. I am not satisfied with

that. In the one Department that has some flexibility, we are doing away with it and imposing a mandatory retirement age. That is a gratuitously unnecessary proposal which the Minister has made no attempt to justify. It is important that our objections should be firmly on the record. I hope that we shall return to the matter at an appropriate time.

The debate has also been about style. If the Minister had listened carefully to our arguments, put in good faith, and had attempted more comprehensively and courteously to reply, he might have made rather more rapid progress. I say that in as friendly a way as I can. He may wish to reflect on that. However, that is water under the bridge, and need not be dwelt on unduly.

The Minister has laboured the point several times that we should all have known about the Bill. He has told us that there were understandings and that he is mystified as to why so much fuss has been made. I am a humble out-of-touch Opposition Back Bencher. I am not privy to conversations that may take place in dark corners and secret locations. I read the Order Paper in good faith. Today's Order Paper says:

"Supreme Court (Offices) Bill: Second Reading

Remaining stages may also be taken."

I take the word "may" at face value. The Order Paper does not say that deals have been done and understandings have been reached, so we should not look at the matter too closely and get away early; it says that the remaining stages may be taken. To me, that means that, if there has been satisfactory consideration on Second Reading, if there are no points of substance dividing the Opposition and the Government and if those who have taken the trouble to attend the debate and listen to the Minister are satisfied, it would be proper for the matter to be dealt with rather more rapidly than most other measures.

None of those conditions has been fulfilled. It was not only proper, but a duty, for the Opposition to seek more elucidation from the Minister. The fact that we have failed is a matter of great regret, but we shall make a note for the future. Perhaps as well as reading the Order Paper I should make inquiries of those in the know to find out whether I shall be required simply to nod something through or whether I am expected to discharge my responsibilities as a Member of Parliament by scrutinising the Government's proposals. Those matters are all to be resolved.

I hope that there is ample evidence on the record from the points made by Conservative Members that we are distinctly unhappy about the measure—its substance and the way in which it was brought to the House. We have tried not to be unduly obstructive—and, I think, succeeded. The Minister will be allowed to take his Bill forward.

I hope that those in another place will read the report of this debate. They may well conclude that the Bill deserves more scrutiny and answers to the questions that were not answered in this House. Given that it is the Lord Chancellor's business, they may well take that opportunity. I hope that they do.

7.28 pm

Mr. Grieve: One or two points arise out of the way in which the debate has been conducted. One of the reasons for having debate is that Ministers should answer questions that are asked. The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department is always courteous and is normally assiduous in answering questions, which is not the case with most of his colleagues. In winding-up speeches, we are frequently treated to cheap moments of invective, the sidelining of points and a little bit of propaganda, after which the Minister sits down.

I make that point because in Committee two pertinent questions were asked by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) which the Minister made no attempt to answer. [HON. MEMBERS: "He did."] I did not get that impression.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman may have been confused by the fact that the Minister called me the Member for Bolton, West and Torridge.

Mr. Grieve: I did not pick that point up.

Will the Minister confirm that the Bill is not a prelude to merging two Departments to create a Department of justice? I assume that the Minister would have told us if that was the intention. On Third Reading, it would be helpful to have reassurance on that pertinent point. The present structure of the Lord Chancellor's Department and the marriage between the Executive and the judicial capacity embodied in the Lord Chancellor, which is valuable and unique to this country, would be seriously jeopardised if the Government intended to merge two Departments. I should be grateful for reassurance. On that basis, and as the matter has been well aired. I am happy to allow the Bill to proceed without a Division.

7.31 pm

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to a lively debate. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) commented on the importance of style. He described the unhappy transformation that he appears to have endured—from powerful Minister and Privy Councillor to, as he rather sadly described it, humble out-of-touch Opposition Member. It may be a measure of the Conservative party's decline that such Conservative Members are here to deal with the matter at length.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said that we have had a full and detailed discussion. There are, however, one or two matters that, in the light of comments made on Third Reading, I must repeat for the avoidance of doubt. I have repeatedly said that there is a legal adviser in the Lord Chancellor's Department who works directly to the permanent secretary. I have stressed that point several times during our proceedings, but for the avoidance of doubt, I do so again.

I answered the point about a Department of justice, but I repeat my answer: the Government have no present plans to act on Sir Peter Middleton's recommendation. I hope that Opposition Members are satisfied that the Bill introduces a very modest change that will benefit public administration by removing an outdated restriction that has become anomalous.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill *[Lords]*

Order for Second Reading read.

7.33 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second Time.

The Bill will enable the United Kingdom to ratify the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty which bans any nuclear weapon test explosion and any other nuclear explosion. The United Kingdom is one of the states whose ratification is a precondition for the treaty's entry into force.

The contents of the Bill are, for the most part, highly technical, but that should not be allowed to obscure its much wider political significance. In simple terms, the Bill is about taking the next step—and a significant one, at that—towards the Government's goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons.

The Government are serious about that goal. We are committed to pressing for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons. We have made it clear that, when we are satisfied with progress towards our goal of global elimination, we shall ensure that British nuclear weapons are included in multilateral negotiations.

We intend to make a difference in this area, as in so many areas of Government policy. We can make a difference, and we intend to do so. Our approach to multilateral disarmament will not be grudging and it will not be one that plays up the obstacles to progress in order to leave things as they are. We intend to be a constructive actor in the process, using our influence to move things forward where we can.

We also approach the matter in a practical fashion. We know that progress towards our goal requires the agreement of the other nuclear weapons states, including some with massively larger holdings than ours. Progress will also depend on the co-operation of the many other states that have no declared nuclear capacity. Let us be clear, however, that we have the vision and will to reach our goal and the commitment to build support for the steps that will mark the way. We shall look for progress simultaneously in a range of areas—transparency, confidence building and a fissile material cut-off treaty—as well as seeking to build on the warhead reductions already achieved. The Bill demonstrates the magnitude of the task, but it also underlines the fact that political will brings results. This Government will never concede that the task is hopeless.

The comprehensive test ban treaty is the culmination of almost 40 years of effort involving painstaking negotiations. When the parties to the non-proliferation treaty agreed a set of principles and objectives in 1995, they described a comprehensive test ban treaty as the next step on the road to nuclear disarmament. We are fully committed to the goals set out in those principles and objectives, and we welcome the CTBT now agreed accordingly. As its preamble makes clear, the treaty will constrain the development and qualitative improvement of nuclear weapons, and end the development of advanced new types. That is truly an important step forward.

The United Kingdom signed the treaty on 24 September 1996. Some 147 other states have now signed the treaty and seven have ratified it. It will come into force six months after the 44 states named in its annexe have ratified it. Those states all took part in the negotiations on the treaty in the conference on disarmament in 1996 and are listed by the International Atomic Energy Authority as having a civil nuclear capability. The United Kingdom is one of those states, 41 of which have already signed.

North Korea, Pakistan and India still have not signed. We are doing what we can, both unilaterally and in concert with others, to encourage all three states to sign and ratify the treaty quickly. A question mark, however, must remain over their commitment to the eventual goal of global nuclear disarmament if they stand in the way of the necessary interim steps.

We are making swift progress with the legislation needed to ratify the treaty. Indeed, when the Bill was introduced in another place, it passed through unamended. We hope to be the first nuclear weapons state to ratify; that will be a further demonstration of our commitment to the treaty, to nuclear disarmament and to non-proliferation.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Will the Minister take this opportunity to praise the former Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, who played such an important part in getting the treaty signed in 1996, as the Minister mentioned earlier?

Mr. Lloyd: I have no difficulty in paying tribute to those who took part in a step which I have described as significant. It would be churlish to say that those who played a part did not contribute to taking events forward.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will take my next words in the spirit in which they are intended. The world has to do a lot more and we shall look for his support when we begin to push the agenda forward in the weeks and months to come. The real battle concerns where we go next. The Bill has already completed its passage of the other place unamended, and I am sure that we shall see the same co-operation in this House.

The treaty establishes a number of new international bodies to ensure that its provisions are properly observed. A comprehensive test ban treaty organisation will be set up in Vienna once the treaty enters into force. It will work closely with the International Atomic Energy Authority and other relevant organisations.

Part of the treaty organisation will be a technical secretariat, which will be responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of the treaty. To that end, the treaty will set up an international monitoring system, which will consist of a worldwide network of monitoring stations. A number of those are in the United Kingdom and dependent territories.

The stations will use various technologies to detect, identify and locate the source of a suspicious event anywhere in the world. The data from the stations will be transmitted to an international data centre, which will be part of the technical secretariat in Vienna. The international data centre will then make the information available to state parties. Meanwhile, until entry into force, a preparatory commission is working in Vienna to develop the many detailed arrangements for implementation of the treaty, including the establishment of the international monitoring system.

The verification regime in the treaty provides for consultation and clarification in cases of indications of possible non-compliance. If necessary, and if a certain proportion of state parties agree, an on-site inspection can start within 96 hours of it being requested. The inspections will be carried out by trained inspectors chosen from an agreed international list of experts, who will report back to the technical secretariat and state parties.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): On verification, how concerned are the Government about the fact that there appear to have been explosions in, for example, the Russian arctic, which it appears seismic technology has not been capable of verifying as definite nuclear explosions? Is not verification the crucial issue? After all, we had only a partial nuclear test ban treaty—a treaty covering only atmospheric explosions—because it was impossible for many decades to check what was going on underground. If explosions are taking place which have not been correctly verified, a large part of the rationale for the treaty could be undermined.

Mr. Lloyd: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's observation. It is, however, our view that the events in the Russian arctic were much more likely to have been caused by an earthquake. Britain has significant relative expertise in seismic areas, and it was certainly the view of our experts that that was the most likely course of events. The advantage of a CTBT coming into operation is that it will provide a challenge mechanism—an opportunity where there are doubts about the credibility and good faith of the parties to the treaty—that will enable an inspection to be set up and conducted very quickly. The treaty will enable us to do a lot more than we are able to under the present system. It both advances the need for science, in which countries such as Britain have expertise, and provides an opportunity for us to pursue matters beyond simple scientific measuring from a distance, by enabling us to look actively at what happens on site. I hope that that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Minister say something about sub-critical explosions and the concern that tests of very small weapons—mini neutron bombs and the like—which may find themselves excluded from the treaty de facto, could occur because it is difficult to know whether they have taken place? Will the Minister give a view on those problems?

Mr. Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is right; sub-critical tests are not prohibited by the treaty. It is necessary, in order to maintain not only the viability but the safety of existing nuclear weapons systems, that sub-critical tests are part of the opportunities available to all nuclear weapon states. Rather than seeing the issue as potentially threatening, I suggest that it is the opposite. It is a necessary safeguard for the whole world that nuclear weapon states maintain the opportunity to take advantage of sub-critical tests. I hope that that reassurance will be helpful to the hon. Gentleman. The issues are important.

The United Kingdom has for many years had a national research programme into the means of detecting and verifying nuclear explosions. The programme enabled the United Kingdom to play a major role in the negotiations on how best to verify the treaty. We aim to retain a national capability to allow us to reach an independent judgment on the data produced by the international monitoring system. That will strengthen our ability to justify a request for an on-site inspection of exactly the kind that the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) and I have been discussing.

With the advent of the treaty, the implications of any changes or deterioration in our Trident warheads will have to be assessed without nuclear testing. Similarly, after any corrective action or refurbishment, we will have to requalify warheads as safe and reliable without nuclear testing. Those requirements will place great demands on the alternatives to nuclear testing. I can tell the hon. Member for Chichester that we intend to use experiments and computer simulation for that purpose. Both are consistent with the terms of the treaty. I hope that the House will accept that that is agreed by all parties to the treaty, not just by the nuclear weapons states.

The treaty requires each state party to establish a national authority to act as the point of contact with the treaty organisation and to be the focal point for the operation of the treaty on its territory. In the UK, the national authority will be set up in the Ministry of Defence.

Although notes on clauses will be available in the Library, I shall turn briefly to the Bill's provisions. As its title suggests, its provisions fall into two broad categories: those relating to the prohibition of nuclear explosions and those enabling inspections to be carried out in the UK under the terms of the treaty.

Clauses 1 and 2 make it an offence, punishable by life imprisonment, to cause a nuclear weapon test explosion or any other nuclear explosion, other than a nuclear weapon explosion carried out in the course of an armed conflict. The offence can be committed in the United Kingdom by anyone. Abroad, the offence can be committed by UK nationals and corporations.

Clauses 4 to 9 cover various aspects of inspections in the UK, such as their formal authorisation by the Secretary of State and the necessary privileges and immunities for the inspection teams. Clause 10 covers the issue of warrants authorising entry and search of premises if offences are suspected. Clauses 11 to 15 contain various technical provisions, and also provide for the Act to bind the Crown.

As I said at the outset, although the Bill is essentially technical, it nevertheless has a significance way beyond that narrow technical remit. It is a genuine pleasure to hold my office at a time when such a significant step on the way to our undoubted goal of the global elimination of nuclear weapons is being taken. In passing the measure, the House will be playing its part in that process. The Government's commitment is that, once we have taken this step, we will return with determination to the task of carrying the agenda forward.

7.46 pm

Mr. David Faber (Westbury): I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill before the House and echo his warm words of support for the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. The Opposition welcome the Bill. As he said, it received a fair wind in another place. We recognise that it provides the legislation necessary to ratify the treaty. He has given us a very full and detailed technical explanation of the Bill's contents, for which I am grateful.

[Mr. David Faber]

Like the Government, the Opposition believe that the world will ultimately be a safer place through the signing of the treaty. The signing of the treaty and discussion of the Bill show that the international community can, by acting with determination, while making sacrifices, reap the benefits at the end of the cold war and the desire for a reduction in the nuclear arsenals of all countries throughout the world.

The former Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, said on the very day that he signed the treaty in New York on 24 September last year:

"It is our firm conviction that this treaty is in the interests of all, and I urge all states to give it their full support."

The full support of all states is, of course, crucial to the success of the treaty.

As the Minister rightly said, the signing of the treaty has come after a long process—many decades—of negotiation. Since 1989 particularly, we have seen profound and significant changes throughout Europe. More people than ever now live in democratic societies. The spread of democracy has made war less likely and the curtailment of the arms race ultimately more achievable.

Threats to our society remain, however, and it is only right that we, as a country and as part of the international community, should recognise and be alert to them. The Opposition remain absolutely committed to our nuclear deterrent and to keeping it fully serviced and updated to counter any potential threat we might face.

It is a shame that the Minister of State did not take the opportunity to reassert the Government's—and his personal—support for the retention and upgrading of the nuclear deterrent, given that he and many of his colleagues have called for the cancellation of the Trident programme in the past.

As Baroness Symons pointed out on Second Reading in another place, the implications of the treaty are profound, and the Minister of State rightly reminded us of that. Any deterioration in the Trident warheads will have to be assessed without recourse to nuclear testing. Such requirements will undoubtedly place an ever greater demand on the computer simulation techniques that provide an alternative and on the shared information and technology that we pool with our allies. However, I know that all hon. Members will agree that that is preferable, and that the treaty must succeed in its ultimate aim to do away for ever with nuclear testing, of whatever sort, and thus lead to a steady reduction in the world's nuclear arsenal.

The Minister of State was helpful in his explanation of the mechanisms in the Bill and the organisations that will flow from it for the monitoring and inspection of nuclear weapons, and he answered questions from my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) and for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). However, he skirted quickly over the issue of ratification. He said that, to date, 147 countries had signed the treaty. According to the Library, 148 countries have signed the treaty, but perhaps the Library has added a country. Of those 147, only seven have so far ratified the treaty and, of the 44 required to sign to bring the treaty into force, I understand that only Japan has ratified it.

I do not suggest that the vast majority of states have anything other than an intention to ratify the treaty, and it is accepted under international law that a moratorium comes into effect once the process of ratification has begun. Both France and China have now agreed to abide by that understanding. However, problems exist in other countries. The Minister of State mentioned three in particular and I shall turn to those in a moment.

The most important country involved is the United States. Does the Minister of State have any information from his American counterparts about when ratification will take place there? President Clinton recently told the United Nations Assembly that the treaty would be presented to the Senate shortly, but some in American political circles are concerned about several aspects of the treaty, including compliance verification and the safety and reliability of their nuclear arsenal. Clearly, it is important that the rest of the world see that the one remaining super-power takes a strong lead, and I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will encourage American ratification as soon as possible. It is important that we, as another major nuclear power, set a good example, and I assume that the United Kingdom will ratify the treaty as soon as possible after the Bill receives Royal Assent.

On the vexed question of the signature of the treaty by India and Pakistan, it is of primary importance that India signs the treaty, as it is likely that Pakistan would follow suit. On Second Reading in another place, Lord Jenkins of Putney called on the Minister to use Labour's long and, for the most part, friendly relationship with India to push for a resolution to the problem. At that stage, he could not predict the Foreign Secretary's disastrous visit to India this summer and the insensitivity that he showed to the Indian Government.

I was surprised that the Minister of State made no mention of the trip in his speech. Can he tell us anything about the discussions that the Foreign Secretary had with his Indian counterparts? Did he push for Indian ratification, and what response did he get? Baroness Symons referred to the sacrifices made by this country in signing the treaty and to the moral arguments that the Government would bring to bear on India. What were those arguments, were they forcefully made, and what response was received?

The most worrying case is that of North Korea. It is clear that, in spite of repeated warnings from the international community, North Korea continues to develop and improve its ballistic capability. Whether it yet possesses the technology to put nuclear warheads on those ballistic weapons, we do not know. However, we live in dangerous times. Economic deprivation is rife in North Korea, and the leadership is constantly looking for ways to deflect local attention from the domestic crisis. Anti-western rhetoric is usually the favourite course and we have all seen many examples of that.

When the former Defence Secretary, Michael Portillo, visited South Korea in January this year, he made clear the then Government's support for the United States policy in the region. The response in one of the North Korean newspapers was to condemn his bellicose utterances. It continued:

"Our people and army are keeping a close eye on the British military whipping up war fever in the Korean peninsula."

I understand that the Minister and some of his colleagues may have a problem, because in the past many of them have held strong views on Korea. Indeed, the Minister has gone so far as to describe American troops in South Korea as a major obstacle to peace talks and to call for their withdrawal. Can he tell us about the

Government's view of the continuing tension in that country and how it might be persuaded to sign the test ban treaty? Is it now the policy of the Government to stand four square alongside our United States allies in that region?

On Second Reading in another place, Lord Moynihan referred to the real problems that the world faces as a result of the possible proliferation of rogue states. Some such states seem positively to revel in their status as the bad boys of the world. While the specific strategic threat to Europe from a communist Soviet Union may have evaporated, we are only too aware of—and frequently debate—the many localised flashpoints around the world.

The procurement of nuclear weapons by several states could quickly turn localised problems into very real concerns for the international community. Both Iran and Libya appear to be working hard to develop their nuclear capacity and to acquire the technology. In Iraq, the situation is very tense, and it is worrying to suppose that the reason why the Iraqi authorities have suddenly cut access for United Nations inspectors is because they have been close to discovering evidence of a nuclear programme. What are the Government's current views on the stand-off in Iraq? Can the Minister confirm that we also stand four square alongside our United States allies on that issue?

No less a figure than the Foreign Secretary himself once criticised the bombing of Baghdad during the Gulf war because it would make it more difficult to achieve peace and security. I hope that that is no longer his view, because those sentiments now seem out of place and old-fashioned. I hope that we are maintaining good relations with the United States and doing all that we can to support the United Nations inspection regime in Iraq.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield reminded us, the Conservatives are proud of the role played by the previous Government in bringing the treaty to fruition. We will do all we can to support the Government in pushing for ratification by all the states. I look forward to ratification by this country as soon as possible and to the Government playing an enthusiastic role in persuading others to do likewise. Once that is achieved, the treaty can begin to fulfil its vital role.

7.57 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): It is a pleasure to speak on this important Bill and to welcome whole-heartedly its speedy introduction by the Government. I hope that it makes fast progress through the House, because it is an historic Bill and will achieve a result that we have desired for a long time. It is surprising that, after the sound and fury of the preceding debate, in which many Conservative Members felt prompted to participate, the Opposition Benches are much emptier for proceedings on this Bill, which is of much more significance than the privileges of lawyers.

The comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty is an important stepping stone to what I am sure everyone wants to see—the eventual multilateral elimination of nuclear weapons. I hope that ratification will take place at the earliest possible opportunity. However, as the hon. Member for Westbury (Mr. Faber) has suggested, there are problems with ratification. It is no fault of the Government—or even of the previous Government's negotiations—that the ratification process will be so rigidly applied that it will be difficult to ensure that the worldwide ban comes into effect at the earliest opportunity.

The hon. Member for Westbury referred to the three states that are refusing to sign, or have said that they are not prepared to do so at the moment. The situation in India and Pakistan is different from that in North Korea. We should—perhaps we do—have some influence with the Governments of India and Pakistan. The Foreign Secretary, in what we are told was a thoroughly successful trip to the Indian sub-continent, may have had discussions on that points, and I should be interested to hear from the Minister whether that is the case. Those countries are also members of the Commonwealth, and if that is to mean anything, it surely means that we can apply influence on a matter of such great importance.

There is also a problem with the United States, where a two-thirds majority is needed to achieve ratification. The chairman of the Senate's foreign affairs committee may have a different view from some Senators on this. Are there measures that the Government can take to reassure our American allies and allay doubts in the American legislature?

Baroness Symons said in another place on 24 July that the British Government would do all they could to encourage the signing and ratification by all states. I should be interested to know what progress has been made towards that objective and what action the Government have taken to engage the attention of allies around the world and encourage them towards signature and ratification.

There are also problems for Britain in the application of the treaty. Only America has the computer technology available to simulate testing and ensure proper maintenance. It is an interesting reflection on Britain's independent deterrent that the only way we can test it is to go to America. Therefore, America has complete control over our deterrent.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that much of the software used by the United States for computer simulation was developed in the United Kingdom by UK engineers?

Mr. Heath: I am aware of that, but it is under the control of the United States. Does Britain have the technology to provide a British alternative to testing and simulation in this country so that we do not have to subscribe to an American hegemony? How else are we to know whether the warheads on the British deterrent are safe and functional? That is a matter of importance if Britain is to have confidence in the process.

Mr. Tyrie: I think that I am right in saying that our nuclear weapons would be targeted from Omaha and, to all intents and purposes, co-operation would be required with the Americans for our missiles to be successfully launched and delivered to their target. In those circumstances, the idea of total independence is a fiction.

Mr. Heath: The hon. Gentleman makes precisely the point that I was seeking to make.

Is there no scope within the treaty for a commitment not to work on qualitative improvements to nuclear technology, and should not the British Government pursue

[Mr. Heath]

that as a further objective? It is absent from the treaty, but it is likely to undermine the confidence of non-nuclear powers if they are aware of further improvements in nuclear weapons technology made by the nuclear powers, yet outwith the terms of the treaty.

The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) made a good point about sub-critical testing, and the Minister's response was a little sanguine. However necessary sub-critical testing may seem to a Government undertaking it, it none the less undermines confidence in the process of non-proliferation and de-escalation of nuclear weapons. The Government have a role in urging their allies not to engage in actions that would undermine that process.

There may well be a legal requirement in the treaty. The hon. Member for Westbury referred to article 18 of the Vienna conveation on the law of treaties. That clearly lays a responsibility on other countries, following their signature on a treaty, not to do anything that would undermine the spirit of that treaty while awaiting its entry into force. I must ask whether American sub-critical testing does or does not do that. I must ask whether the underground tremor in the Russian arctic does that. The Minister was happy to ascribe that tremor to a seismic disturbance; I am not sure that everyone would do that, and certainly we do not have the technology to be sure. It is clear to me that all signatories must refrain from any behaviour that undermines the treaty as a whole.

Are we confident that we have the verification methods available to be sure that the treaty is being complied with? Is the sensor network sufficiently sophisticated? Does it have a sufficiently wide geographical spread? Is the international monitoring sufficiently robust to provide reassurance, as that is critical to the process?

There are further moves that the British Government could make. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell) referred to some of those during the defence debate this week, and it would be otiose of me to repeat them. I hope that the Government, having taken the welcome step of introducing the Bill at an early stage, will apply all their energies to diplomatic initiatives to take the measure one stage further.

It is not good enough for our Government to stay silent when these matters are discussed. They must take the initiative so that we can move on to serious talks on strategic arms reduction. We could show an example by ensuring that the number of warheads on Trident is no less and no more than those on Polaris, which it replaces. That would show that we were prepared to take the initiative in moving global nuclear disarmament forward. I hope that the Minister can reassure me on those points, but meanwhile I repeat that the Liberal Democrats will give him every support to ensure the swift passage of the Bill through the House.

8.6 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Nobody who lived through the Cuban missile crisis could do anything other than welcome the Bill, and we hope that the comprehensive test ban treaty will soon be ratified. I recall when I was at school that an air-raid siren was placed on top of the building at the time of the Cuban crisis. There was a real fear among children in their early teens, as I was at the time. I hope that we never witness anything like that again.

During an intervention on the Minister, I talked about the role of the previous Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, but he was not just there to take part in discussions. A briefing prepared by the international affairs and defence section of the Library says:

"At the end of May 1996 the Conference chairman, Ambassador Ramaker of the Netherlands, proposed a solution based on a British idea."

The British idea emanated from the Foreign Office, which at the time was under the leadership of Malcolm Rifkind. Britain's idea was that all eight countries with nuclear weapons, as well as those "threshold nations" on the brink of having them—they may already have them—

"would have to ratify before entry into force, but they would not be singled out as such."

We must not forget the history since the Cuban crisis. Before I entered the House of Commons, I paid regular visits to the former Soviet Union. It was apparent that the citizens of the Soviet Union had no desire to witness or to take part in any nuclear war, as they well remembered that 24 million Russians died in the second world war. We should not, however, forget that in those days the Soviet Government were not answerable to the people of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union brought SS20 missiles into Czechoslovakia as it was then known, the German so-called Democratic Republic and Poland to threaten western Europe, many Labour Members who were members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at the time, opposed the western and British Governments' reaction, the deployment of Cruise missiles.

It is a sad truth, but the doctrine of MAD—mutual assured destruction—kept the peace. Because there was nuclear balance, there was no nuclear war. We all hope that there will come a time when there are no more nuclear weapons in the world, but, as long as there are, there has to be such a balance. This treaty, when ratified by all the countries, will ensure that the balance will be maintained and that eventually there will be no more nuclear weapons.

8.10 pm

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Obviously, I welcome the fact that the official Opposition are completely behind the Government in pushing the Bill through the House, as are the Liberal Democrats. It is an important Bill and I think that the whole House accepts that. Some of the welcome was perhaps less whole-hearted than it might have been under the circumstances.

I shall try to deal with a number of the issues of substance that were raised. Clearly, ratification is an important issue. There can be no doubt about that. I do not think that there is an argument that the treaty, as structured, went about the process of ratification sensibly. In the end, there has to be a global treaty to move the whole world forward. Therefore, we need ratification by all 44 states identified as would-be ratifiers to bring the treaty into operation.

It is a matter of fact that the present and the previous British Governments have been active in pursuing precisely that process on a global scale. In fact, we have taken part with our European Union colleagues in demarches to all the countries that have not already signed the treaty. We will continue to be active in that way, and we will certainly continue to pursue those who have not

signed and who look as if they do not want to ratify, and draw to their attention the fact that there is not only a moral but a practical imperative that they should take part in that process. Yes, we will be engaged and we will look for support from the whole House for our activities.

I am a little concerned that there should be doubts about the position of the United States. In a letter to the Senate seeking consent to ratification in September, President Clinton said:

"The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is of singular significance to the continuing efforts to stem nuclear proliferation and strengthen regional and global stability. Its conclusion marks the achievement of the highest priority item on the international arms control and non-proliferation agenda. Its effective implementation will provide a foundation on which efforts to control and limit nuclear weapons can be soundly based."

With that sort of endorsement, doubts about the attitude of the White House are misplaced. The White House certainly is using and will use its influence with the Senate; so do we with our American allies. If we explained to the American President that there were doubts in Britain about his role, he might take that as a slight on his intentions and his actions.

North Korea is already a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty, which binds it not to test. Of course, that is not the same as signing the CTBT, and we want Korea to sign and to ratify it. That is important, and we will continue to put pressure on the North Koreans in every way we can, along with our allies and the world community. It is important to recognise that this is not some relic of the cold war, with part of the global divide pitted against others. The whole of the P5—Britain, the United States and France obviously, but also Russia and China—are as one on this treaty. We collectively have a common interest in ensuring that North Korea is party to the treaty. While we cannot give guarantees on that, the international community is collectively engaged on that issue.

I was asked about Iraq. Obviously, the position there is serious and we are greatly concerned. There may have been a slight easing of the Iraqi position, but the British Government's position is clear. We are absolutely committed to the role of the United Nations. We have been major contributors to the debate at the United Nations and we will continue to pursue the issue in a way that makes it clear to the Iraqis that there can be no compromise. The world cannot and will not allow compromise in that area. There should be no ambiguity there.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) raised a number of questions. To be slightly churlish in response to the slight note of churlishness that I detected from the hon. Gentleman, I thought that a little confusion was emerging. On the one hand, he said that Britain should do more in the area of sub-critical tests and maintaining our independent verification capacity, but he also raised doubts raised about whether those were necessary or were simply a prelude to a more dangerous and unstable world. Our position and that of all those who negotiated the treaty is that the need to maintain a safe and reliable system under the CTBT allows for those sorts of test.

Mr. David Heath: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not equating computer simulation with sub-critical testing, because they are not identical. I would certainly differentiate between them. Britain should be engaged in developing the one; the other is unhelpful to the process. I had certainly hoped not to seem churlish about the Government in anything I said and I very much welcome the views that the Minister has expressed.

Mr. Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman makes his point. I simply say that safety and reliability are what we are about. That is also what the Americans and others are about. We believe that the international monitoring system works and should allow for the detection of explosions as small as 1 kilotonne on a global basis. That is a significant reassurance. It is far more than exists now. The simple truth of the treaty is that if it is brought into operation and ratified, it will provide the opportunity for inspections to be challenged and bring in a regime that the world lacks. In so doing, it will enhance the safety of the world. Accordingly, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

NUCLEAR EXPLOSIONS (PROHIBITION AND INSPECTIONS) BILL *[Lords]* [*Money*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenses of the Secretary of State incurred in consequence of the Act.—[*Jane Kennedy.*]

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) (Oil and Chemical Pollution of Fish) Order 1997 (S.I., 1997, No. 2509), dated 21st October 1997, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22nd October, be approved.—[*Jane Kennedy.*]

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 116 (Northern Ireland Grand Committee (sittings),

That the Northern Ireland Grand Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 11th December, Thursday 29th January, Thursday 26th February, Thursday 26th March, Thursday 4th June and Thursday 2nd July at half-past Ten o'clock.—[*Jane Kennedy.*]

Question agreed to.

London Fire Service

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Jane Kennedy.]*

8.17 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I thank the Chair for this opportunity to speak on the Adjournment about the London fire service and an issue that is topical and of immense concern to the people of London, who value the security provided by the service and are worried about the way in which it is being eroded.

The subject is topical for two reasons. First, I think that a request to approve specific cuts in fire service provision in London is sitting on the Minister's desk. It is also topical in a slightly broader sense, in that, within a few days, it will be the 10th anniversary of the King's Cross disaster, which was the last really catastrophic fire in London.

In preparing for this debate, I read some of the Fennell report on that disaster, and it makes striking reading. The great courage and professionalism of the firefighters comes across, as does the importance of precision timing, which is a matter of discipline, training and good management, as well as of equipment, of where the equipment is, and of the number of firefighters available. That ultimately comes down to resources—to money—and that is the subtext of our debate.

I want to speak from a Londonwide standpoint, but I also have a parochial interest. We have not had a catastrophic fire in Twickenham, but in recent memory there were two major events: the loss of a substantial part of our Tudor heritage in the Hampton court fire; and the devastating fire on Eel Pie island—a scenic spot that some hon. Members may know—that took out many industrial buildings and wiped away the livelihoods of many local artisans.

Fortunately, no loss of life was involved, but my constituents are very aware of the risks of fire. That awareness has been heightened by the fact that we have been the subject of severe cuts. In the cuts at the beginning of this year, we lost one of the three appliances in the local stations and another is shortly to be moved; we have effectively lost two thirds of our firefighting capacity. I am not an expert and do not know precisely what that means for response times, but common sense suggests that when cuts take place on a large scale the capacity of the fire service to respond to disasters is correspondingly diminished.

The London fire and civil defence authority has had to recommend the closure of two more fire stations: one in the Barbican—the only one left in the ring of steel of the City—and one at Shooter's hill, while four others have been reduced to part-time status. The problem is that that is neither the beginning nor the end of the process. Earlier in the year, 12 appliances were removed. Downham and Addington are on the long list of other places under threat, and many people are anxious about the future of their stations.

It is not merely a question of the approval of closure of particular stations and appliances; behind that—this is the nub of the debate—is a severe financial crisis. London Members will have received a letter from the chief fire officer, setting out the nature of the authority's financial problems. In the coming financial year it faces a deficit of about £21 million.

That deficit has not come out of the blue and is not a one-off event. As the chief fire officer clearly explains, the service has been trying to economise for years. It could not possibly be described as spendthrift or profligate; it has made savings of about £28 million a year; 10 per cent. of the staff have been cut in the past five years; and substantial reserves—£18 million, I believe—have been put towards preventing further closures.

The serious financial problem is marked out from those of other Government services by the extreme rigidity with which the service's finances have to be conducted. That rigidity stems from several elements. The service is a single-purpose local authority and does not have the capacity of local councils or the Government to switch resources from one activity to another. Rigidity is also a result of the capping system that the Government inherited. The capping limit is based on a highly restrictive spending assessment—allowing, I believe, less than 1 per cent. growth a year—that is far below the expenditure needs.

The system has been crippling for the service because its two main items of expenditure are entirely beyond its control and are growing considerably. One, which was determined only a couple of weeks ago, after the closure decisions were announced, is an increase in firefighters' pay of 4.8 per cent. a year—somewhat beyond the retail prices index. I do not begrudge firefighters extra pay, but it should be reflected in the financial provision for the service.

More serious even than pay is the problem of pensions. The service suffers the same problem as the police, some other parts of the public sector, and whole countries such as Italy, in that it is dependent on a pay-as-you-go system of pensions. About 20 per cent. of the service's budget now goes on pensions and the cost is escalating rapidly; I believe that there was 20 per cent. growth in pension provision last year, and about 50 per cent. over the past five years. A little mental arithmetic will show the Minister that far more money is needed than is being made available from central Government.

The problem is getting worse, partly for the good reason that firefighters are living longer. We all welcome that, but it means that their pension entitlements continue for longer. A special problem is looming: about 3,000 firefighters are due to retire in the next few years because of the bunching of recruitment in the 1970s, and each one of them will be entitled to a pension of about £10,000 a year.

All that is taking place at a time when the number of fire personnel is reducing, so we have a ridiculous state of affairs in which more and more retired firefighters have to be funded by fewer and fewer current firefighters, all of whom pay a substantial amount—11 per cent. of their pay, I think—into the scheme. The underlying financial position of the service is dire indeed.

I read the report of the actuaries who were commissioned to consider the problem in detail. Actuaries' reports are, by definition, not terribly exciting reading, but this report is in fact chilling. It describes a series of scenarios, based on different assumptions about pay and retirement rates and shows that, within the next five years, more than a third of the service's budget will have to go towards pension provision. That is simply not sustainable.

The problem has been looming for years, so why has not something been done about it? I notice that there is not a single Conservative Member present, but the Tories should be held to account. The matter was referred about four years ago to the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who set up an inquiry into the pension problem, which was intended to report within six months; to the best of my knowledge, it has never reported.

The issue has been debated in the House: I looked up *Hansard* for March and May last year, when members of the previous Government made the most extraordinarily convoluted excuses for not dealing with the problem. The present Government have inherited the problem, but they now have the responsibility for doing something about it.

The excuses advanced were extraordinary. My predecessor, Mr. Jessel, who was a Member of Parliament for 27 years, may not have done a great deal that was memorable—I have paid him compliments in the House none the less—but, unfortunately for him, he will always be remembered for his comments on the fire service. Called upon to justify closures in the local service, he tried to explain that, as British households no longer used candles, we did not really need a fire service. Perhaps he did not mean it literally, but that unfortunate remark has gone down as his epitaph.

I am sure that the Minister would expect me to say that the Government should sign a large cheque, and that is indeed part of the answer, but the matter is more complex. We must consider each of the three major stakeholders in the future of the service. The London local authorities are involved, because it is a London problem and London people legitimately have to pay for it; it is a Government responsibility, because many of the key commitments, notably on pay, pensions and standards, are determined by Government; and there is an obligation on the service itself to maintain the highest standards of performance and flexibility. Everyone must make a contribution.

I start with local councils. A proposal is floating around, which I think originated with the chairman of the fire authority, that part of the fire service budget should be—I am not sure about the word—decapped, particularly its pension aspect. Liberal Democrats are strong advocates of the removal of capping as a matter of general principle, and that principle should apply to the fire service. The authority should be free operationally to make decisions and it should be accountable for them. Therefore, we would welcome a relaxation of capping.

But any capping which is so restricted to one item of expenditure does not deal with the problem and does not introduce any real operational flexibility in the system. Moreover, it would have a serious impact on London local authorities. There was a precept rise last year of 20 per cent. To meet the requirement entirely through local authority precepting would mean an increase, I think, of 50 per cent. this year, which would be regarded with considerable reserve by London local authorities. Clearly, they must make a contribution, but that cannot be seen as the major contribution to solving the problem.

That brings me to the second element of the package, which is the Government's contribution. Over the years, the problem has been that the fire service has operated within the national constraint of the spending assessment and the rate support grant growth has been totally inadequate. That now needs to be addressed. I appreciate that the Minister does not control the budget, but I hope that he will at least have a vigorous conversation with his colleague in the Department of the Environment, who does, and explain to him that increased provision must be made for this item.

In terms of the total national budget we are not talking about large sums of money, but the Government have locked themselves into this extremely restrictive approach to public spending, which makes it difficult to switch money between Departments. That flexibility has been shown in respect of health and education, and this is one area where it will have to be found again.

One of the things that has struck me as a new Member looking at some of the emergency services in London is the extraordinary way in which the ambulance service and the Metropolitan police in particular have advanced in their thinking about management; about the way in which they run their internal affairs. Even the greatest friends of the fire service would say that it was probably some way behind them, but that is not the fault of the fire service. Many of those to whom I have talked in management, and the firefighters, have advanced ideas for making the service more flexible, but they are substantially constrained in what they can do by the law.

The principles of the fire service were set down in legislation in 1948, and they have not been changed for the best part of 50 years. It is required to observe procedures which relate to residential conditions and standards of risk which are inappropriate to present conditions; they must be modified.

Interesting ideas for raising money are being circulated by people in the fire service. I am not qualified to evaluate their technical feasibility, but they seem interesting and positive. The fire service is a centre of excellence in training, consultancy and risk, and for such services the commercial sector should be charged. I do not want to go the whole hog and see fire engines blazing through London with Coca-Cola or bra adverts on the side. That is probably not the kind of commercialism that we want to see. But there may be scope for doing much more. However, legislative provision is required for that. That is a way in which the Home Office can help the fire service to rise to the challenge of modernisation for the next century.

The responsibility is multifaceted. It is partly a responsibility that falls on the people of London to show that they are willing to pay a little more for this crucial service; it partly rests on the fire service itself to modernise, but above all, particularly given the locus of the debate, it rests on Government initiative to create the legislative framework for modernisation, and also to sort out this appalling financial mess which, unless something is done quickly, will result in a substantial and damaging reduction in services in the capital.

8.33 pm

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing time for this important debate. I am grateful to him and to my hon. Friend the Minister for allowing me the opportunity to contribute.

I should say immediately that I was a member of the London fire brigade for some 23 years and an elected official of the Fire Brigades Union. I am now an out-of-trade member of that trade union.

[Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick]

I shall be brief, because the hon. Gentleman dealt comprehensively with the issues confronting the London fire service. But I want to focus on the key problems which, as the hon. Gentleman said, are primarily financial. As he said, they include the standard spending assessment, the resources allocated to the London fire brigade, and, in particular, the question of pensions.

With regard to the SSA, the amount of money afforded by Government to the London fire and civil defence authority has, as the hon. Gentleman said, dwindled in recent years. Some awards have been below inflation and some have certainly not met the service's needs, and that at a time when there is a clear rising trend in the number of calls received by the service.

The Fire Services Act 1947 takes no real account of the special services which these days the fire service is called upon to provide. It was drafted in the light of the brigade's ability to respond to fires. These days, a third of calls attended by the fire service are for special services, which range from the King's Cross disaster, to road traffic accidents, rail crashes, chemical incidents and humanitarian services. Under the Fire Services Act, the funding formula takes no account of the brigade's responsibility to carry out those tasks. The increasing pressure on the service has led to a growing belief that they should be taken into account and that the funding formula should be revisited.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the intensified pressure on the pension scheme. As the hon. Member for Twickenham said, the previous Government were aware of the growing pressure resulting from the structure of the pension scheme. In the debate on the Queen's Speech in 1994, my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin) said:

"I hope that we might get an assurance from the Government that, when the standard spending assessments are announced in the next couple of weeks, they will give some guarantee on disregards in the SSAs with regard to the rising costs of pensions within the fire and civil defence authorities. Unless that is done, there is a real prospect that we face dramatic cuts in the cover provided by the fire and civil defence authority in the next financial year."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1994; Vol. 250, c. 293.]

As has been said today, that pressure is intensifying.

As the hon. Member for Twickenham said, firefighters contribute 11 per cent. of their salaries towards the pension scheme, but it is a non-funded scheme, which means that payments to retired firefighters come out of the revenue account. In the 1970s, firefighters were required to work 56 hours. In 1974, that was reduced to a 48-hour week and in 1979, to the present 42-hour week. As a result, there were some 2,000 new members of the fire service in London alone; their pensions are coming up for payment. The pressure which has been building up for some years will intensify during the next five years, and the situation will obviously deteriorate.

It is generally accepted that, as well as the increased number of calls to which the service responds, there is an increase in the diversity of calls that they have to attend. No one questions firefighters' professionalism and bravery, nor the public esteem in which the fire service is held. I understand from my dealings with the London fire and civil defence authority that every attempt is being made to address the financial crisis which it faces. Income generation, efficiency measures, cuts over a number of years and private finance initiatives are all being considered as a way of mitigating a difficult situation in which the service finds itself.

Notwithstanding that, a number of London Members are obviously concerned and would jointly request an urgent examination of the funding formula to avoid the immediate crisis. A searching examination should be carried out to find medium and long-term solutions to the problems confronting a service that is regarded as a world leader. Unfortunately, it is in danger of losing that position.

I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has fought and campaigned for the fire service in his local area, as he did when he was the shadow spokesperson. He and his ministerial colleagues are doing all they can to find solutions to these problems. We welcome his contribution, and hope that he will tell us how much progress is being made on this important issue.

8.40 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing this debate, and on the measured and responsible way in which he presented the issues.

The hon. Gentleman said that it comes down to resources and money, which is the subtext of the debate. Money may be the subtext, but an injection of cash cannot, in itself, resolve the problem, and that was acknowledged. The crisis in the London fire and civil defence authority is due to the fact that there are more fire service pensioners than firefighters in London. Critically, the pension scheme is not a fully funded scheme, but is run on a pay-as-you-go basis.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the complete absence of Conservative Members from the debate is significant. In the past 18 years, they had the opportunity in government to tackle the issues that were constantly raised about the impending problem in the London fire service, but they did not do so. They did not try to reform the pension scheme to take account of the 1970s bulge, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) alluded, which occurred when the fire service expanded its numbers, and thus the number of future pensioners. They did nothing, except to lay off 1,000 firefighters. That is the extent of the reduction in the number of firefighters in London under the Conservative Administration since 1985. It is shameful that the Conservative Benches are entirely empty.

Under the scheme, the authority presently has to make available 20 per cent. of its annual budget to pay its contribution towards current pensions. That shows the incoherence and unpredictability of such a pay-as-you-go scheme. There is no way of taking account of the vagaries of early retirement, perhaps through disability in service, or the increased longevity, thank goodness, of firefighters who have retired from the service. Incidentally, firefighters retire at age 50. Benefits under the scheme accrue rapidly, but firefighters start pension life at a much earlier age than is usual.

My hon. Friend referred to the 1947 Act, under which the early years of the pension scheme benefited by being on a pay-as-you-go basis. The number of pensioners at that time was small, so more of the revenue budget could be used for the needs of the service. In the early days,

the problems were not apparent, but they were predictable. The Government must now tackle those problems for the long term.

I echo my hon. Friend's words: he urged the Minister to examine the funding formula and to find a long-term solution to the problem. That can be achieved only by addressing the basis of the contributions to the pension scheme. I look forward the Minister's response to those aspects of the debate.

8.44 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on securing this Adjournment debate.

I agree with everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) said. I was the legal adviser to the Fire Brigades Union for many years. Not having to do it myself, I appreciate how difficult and demanding is the job of a firefighter. The quality of the service given by the London fire brigade to the people of London and the bravery shown by its firefighters are second to none throughout the world. Firefighters deserve every penny that the pay formula, which has preserved industrial peace in the fire service since 1978, has provided this year.

There is a long-term need to update the 1947 Act. My hon. Friend referred to the problem of special service calls not being reflected in the funding formula for the fire service. Last year, under the previous Government, we lost one of the pumps at Hendon fire station in my constituency. Under the fire risk formula as it then was—there were arguments about how it should be interpreted—we were forced to accept that decision. However, if the special service risks in the area had been taken into account, I do not think that the removal of that pump could have been justified.

The A41, the A1, the M1 and the north circular road all go through my constituency; a major expansion at Brent Cross is about to take place; we have the main railway line up to the west coast; and we had the IRA bomb at Staples Corner several years ago. We could have special service calls to rail crashes, car crashes and bomb incidents, but that is not reflected in the fire service allocation, so we lost our pump at Hendon. Because the 1947 Act is out of date, the neighbouring constituency of Finchley lost its emergency tender. This year is the golden jubilee of that Act, and I hope that the Minister will give us an assurance that it will be examined in the long term.

The pension scheme is generous, but it needs to be. Firefighting is a dangerous job, and we must make the scheme attractive to firefighters. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) is wrong in saying that firefighters retire at 50: they retire after 30 years' service or at age 55, whichever comes first, and senior officers retire at 60. Having seen firefighters who are approaching that age, I think that no one would begrudge that retirement date. Given the physical demands of the job, few people of that age could cope with the lifting and crawling about in dangerous conditions.

I hope that there will be no diminution of the pension scheme, and that long-term solutions will be found to the problems of the fire service in London and nationally.

8.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. George Howarth): I join my hon. Friends in congratulating the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on initiating this debate on the London fire service. At the risk of damaging his reputation, I also congratulate him on the measured and thoughtful way in which he presented the subject. He alluded to the fact that his style is in sharp contrast to that of his predecessor. He was perhaps not so amusing as his predecessor, but he was thoughtful nevertheless.

I understand the concerns of hon. Members and their constituents about the quality of fire services, and I am aware of the sensitivities that inevitably surround proposals that change existing arrangements for fire cover.

Given that the performance of the fire service has been raised in the debate, implicitly and, in some cases, explicitly, I feel that I should comment on the service's performance in the country as a whole, and specifically in London. As hon. Members have made clear, we have reason to be proud of the service. The hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned the response to the King's Cross disaster; that is a good example of the service's response to difficult situations and the way in which it gives of its best—often in fraught conditions—earning the deserved pride and support of both the House and the general public.

It is a privilege for me, holding the office that I hold, to work with a service that is so highly regarded by the public: a service which, as has been said, is courageous, which is on the whole well led and which achieves such high standards of performance. Those qualities were recognised in the 1995 report of the Audit Commission's study of the fire service, entitled "In the line of fire".

Several of my hon. Friends—and, indeed, the hon. Member for Twickenham—raised the subject of the 1947 Act. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) reminded us that this year marked its golden anniversary. "In the line of fire" raised many issues connected with fire risk assessment and the way in which the London fire service should operate, and there are important lessons to be learnt from it. I shall say more about that shortly, but I think that we should first accept—as several hon. Members have said—that the conditions in which the fire services operate, and the type of work that they have to do, have changed considerably since 1947.

Let me make a simple point which I think illustrates that very well. As I was not born then, I shall take it on trust that, to those who wandered the streets of London or any other major city in 1947, traffic levels alone would demonstrate the stark difference between the risks that existed then and those that exist now. It is necessary only to travel around London at any time during the week to realise how difficult the position now is.

[Mr. George Howarth]

Having said that, I must point out that the 1947 Act—initiated under the Labour Government of the day—has, until recently, stood the test of time very well. It has been adapted, the fire services have operated within it and its basic principles were very good. We should not underestimate the Act; but that does not mean that it does not need to be modernised. We all recognise that a much more modern approach is needed to the way in which we assess risk and provide fire services.

Each year, the Audit Commission publishes a report on performance indicators for local authorities. In its latest report, for the year 1995–96—published in March—the commission said that the fire service was

"one of the most consistently high-performing services in local government. Most brigades achieved national standards for at least nine out of ten fire calls during all three years from 1993–94 to 1995–96, with the poorest performances significantly improving over this period. These improvements were achieved with increases in spending no higher than the level of inflation."

The financial difficulties that all hon. Members have mentioned applied at that time, particularly in London. The increase in standard spending assessment was 1.1 per cent. in 1994–95; 0.8 per cent. in 1995–96; 0.4 per cent. in 1996–97; and zero per cent. in 1997–98. Against a background of real-terms decline in resources, however, the service has continued to improve.

The Government are intent on building on the solid foundations that already exist. There will be more emphasis on partnership, and we intend to forge ever-closer links with fire service interests: trade unions, the local authorities concerned—single-purpose or otherwise—and chief fire officers. It is a cornerstone of our attitude to local government that we take a partnership approach, and respect and recognise the legitimate interests that are brought to bear on fire and, indeed, other services.

Let me say a little about the duties of fire authorities. The fire service is, of course, a local authority service. Statutory responsibility for providing fire services rests with the local fire authority—in London, the London fire and civil defence authority. Under the 1947 Act, it is for the fire authority to secure, among other things,

"the services for their area of such a fire brigade and such equipment as may be necessary to meet efficiently all normal requirements."

The fire authority sets the budget for its brigade, and it is up to it to ensure that that budget is set at such a level that its statutory responsibilities can be properly discharged.

Section 19 of the Act provides safeguards to ensure that the statutory responsibilities are met. Subsection (4) requires that a fire authority cannot reduce the number of fire stations, fire appliances and fire-fighting posts without the express consent of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. My right hon. Friend will grant his approval only if the following conditions are satisfied. First, the proposals must have been sufficiently widely publicised, in sufficient detail and with adequate time, to enable any interested party to make proper representations. Secondly, those representations must have been considered by the fire authority. Thirdly, Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services must have advised that the national standards of fire cover will be maintained if the proposals are ever to be implemented.

The existing agreed and published criteria make it clear that the Home Secretary will also take into account any representations that are made directly to him. I invite any hon. Member—indeed, anyone with an interest in the subject—to make representations in connection with section 19 applications: my right hon. Friend and I will give them all due consideration.

As the hon. Member for Twickenham said, we have now received a section 19 application from the London fire authority seeking approval for the closure of the fire stations at Shooters Hill and the Barbican, and new arrangements for the provision of fire cover on the River Thames. Until now, there have been no strong representations about the proposals for the Thames, although such representations may emerge; but I have already received written representations from hon. Members about Shooters Hill. I do not think that any representations have yet been received about the Barbican proposals. We shall consider representations and, as part of that process, seek technical advice from Her Majesty's inspectorate of fire services. I assure hon. Members that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I will listen carefully to representations by hon. Members, interested organisations or individuals who wish to comment on the proposals.

I strongly assure the House that, having taken technical advice, we shall not approve any decision that we are advised would place the lives of Londoners at risk. It would be improper for me to give any indication of our likely reaction to the proposals. However, we would not agree to a proposal unless there were overwhelming grounds and we were satisfied that no lives would be put at risk.

On the issue of fire cover, the London section 19 proposals follow recommendations that were made in the authority's review of fire cover, which was published in December 1995, and subsequent follow-up work. All fire authorities regularly review fire risks in their area to ensure that the brigades' deployment of resources is updated in the light of changing circumstances. I think that the hon. Member for Twickenham mentioned Downham. That has been discussed, but I confirm that it forms no part of the section 19 application that is currently before us. As there is no proposal for that fire station at this time, it is not being considered.

Levels of fire cover are determined locally against nationally recommended standards that dictate the initial response to a fire in terms of weight and speed of attack. They rest on four main standards of service according to the risk category of the area, and they assume for each category that a predetermined number of fire-fighting appliances should attend within a certain time. The standards are not just recommended nationally: they are nationally agreed by the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council, which is constituted under the Fire Services Act 1947 to represent fire service interests in advising the Home Secretary. I have chaired the two most recent meetings of that body and I know that it takes its responsibilities very seriously. The standards were extensively reviewed in 1985 by the advisory councils for England and Wales and for Scotland. The standards have enabled all concerned to know where they stand on the minimum level of service that should be delivered.

The Audit Commission recommended in 1995 that there should be another review of the level of fire cover. The hon. Member for Twickenham spoke about that. The commission recognised that no fundamental change should be considered without careful research. I assure the House that we shall carry out such research on any proposals that are received under the process. A review of fire cover standards is being undertaken by a joint committee of the advisory councils for England and Wales and for Scotland. That research is under way, and I look forward to receiving the committee's report in due course.

I shall now deal with fire service budgets because in many ways they are the heart of the concerns that have been expressed by hon. Members. Fire authorities have to set their budgets within the overall framework for local government spending, and that currently includes the criteria that are set for council tax capping. In London, the fire authority's revenue budget for 1997–98 is £267 million—the limit that is permitted under council tax capping policy and some £13 million or 5 per cent. above its standard spending assessment.

The Government are committed to ending crude and universal capping as soon as possible. In July, in collaboration with local government, we announced a review of local government finance which, among other things, will help to put in place the changes that are needed to deliver that commitment. In the meantime, capping will remain in place for 1998–99 and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will announce his provisional capping principles later this year. I assure the House that that announcement will be made in good time so that people will know where they stand.

Under current arrangements, it is open to authorities to set budgets that are higher than the provisional capping limit and to apply for redetermination of the cap if they think that they cannot set budgets that would allow them to meet their statutory obligations. There were examples of that happening under the previous Government.

The hon. Member for Twickenham spoke about capital expenditure. Obviously, we are watching that carefully. Eight private finance initiative projects are currently in existence through which the Government are helping local authorities. One such project is in London and it is getting, I think, £70,000 in consultancy support to see how it can benefit from the PFI proposals. Although no immediate relief is available in terms of the overall limits, we are considering carefully and constructively how the PFI can be taken forward and used in that context.

My hon. Friends the Members for Brent, North, for Hendon and for Poplar and Canning Town mentioned the wider question of fire service funding, as did the hon. Member for Twickenham. I do not pretend that the problems of funding public services are easy, or that the funding problems that we inherited can be resolved overnight. The hon. Gentleman graciously accepted that—and I was pleased that, for once, no one suggested that the matter could have been resolved by a penny on income tax. He conceded that we had inherited a very difficult situation from our predecessors.

Although, in view of the constraints on its funding, I commend the fire service for maintaining its performance, I am well aware of the financial pressures confronting London and many other fire authorities. Those have been fully represented by myself and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in our discussions with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and in representations that have been made to the Treasury on the SSA settlement.

I can say no more now, but it is fair to say that, in the past few weeks, several of my hon. Friends have represented those concerns to me, not in the Chamber but elsewhere. It is also fair to say that the observations that have been made tonight will be given full weight in our deliberations during the next few weeks, and that both Councillor Ritchie and the chief fire officer, Brian Robinson, have had the opportunity to raise those matters with me privately in a meeting, and I am well aware of their concerns.

The Government are committed to sticking to planned overall spending allocations for the first two years of our time in office, but that should not rule out adjustments of priorities within those totals, as hon. Members conceded. I am well aware of the 4.8 per cent. pay settlement that was announced a week ago, and obviously that will form part of our considerations.

We are examining spending throughout government in the comprehensive spending review, to discover what the current priorities are and where they may be shifted. That gives us a further opportunity to consider some of the problems and the fundamental issues and spending priorities in the fire service, looking at standards of fire service cover, fire safety, funding and the structure of the fire service. I hope that we make progress on that.

We are committed to a consultative approach, and I expect that consultation process to start from the end of November. The Home Office has worked closely with the Local Government Association and other fire service interests to assess future fire service spending pressures and to look at the scope for efficiency savings. This year's report of the local authorities' fire service expenditure forecasting group has drawn particular attention to the pressures in respect of pensions, training and fire safety. Each of those issues is being addressed differently.

The hon. Member for Twickenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North mentioned difficulties with pensions. Hon. Members will be aware that the previous Government commissioned a review of the fire service pension fund. I regularly asked them when they would publish it, and I had begun to believe that it had disappeared into the ether, but lo and behold, to their credit, when we entered office I found that it was advanced and that work was being done on it.

I intend to publish the findings of that review as soon as it is practicable to do so, but I must tell the House that there is no easy solution to the problem. The hon. Member for Twickenham said that he suspects that a cheque book may be needed somewhere along the line. There is no cheque book. Any solution must be a long-term solution: it cannot be implemented overnight. It will be many years before we can get the pension scheme into the type of balance that we would expect. There are many suggestions as to how that can be done and we will have to make a choice at some stage. None of those suggestions, however, lead us to the conclusion that the matter can be resolved speedily.

[Mr. George Howarth]

Decisions on the provisional local government settlement for England for 1998–99 will be announced within the month. There has been some wild talk—although not in the House tonight—and it has been reported in the media that difficulties will be experienced in London. I do not believe that at this time it is either necessary or appropriate for anybody, whether in the fire service or among the general public, to panic. As I said earlier, no decisions will be made by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary or me that will put lives in jeopardy.

The most sensible thing for all concerned is to await next month's announcement. When that announcement is made, I ask that people compare what we have achieved with the achievements of the previous Government, which, as many people have said, is a fairly sorry record.

I can assure hon. Members that fire service funding pressures, including those for London, are noted and are being carefully considered. When the figures are announced next month, I will be happy to be judged on the extent to which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I have noted those pressures and taken them into account. I hope that, when that happens, hon. Members will feel that we have done right by the fire service in England.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at ten minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 7 November 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Innovation (Small Firms)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Janet Anderson.]*

9.34 am

The Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry (Mrs. Barbara Roche): The theme of today's debate is doubly important, as innovation—the successful exploitation of new ideas—is a key factor in the competitiveness of this country, and small firms provide the motor which will push forward wealth creation, employment and quality of life for the benefit of us all.

Innovation is now everybody's business—large and small companies, Government, and the providers of new ideas and techniques in the knowledge base. It is true to say that, the more it is seen as key to competitiveness, the more likely we are to see our companies succeed, grow and prosper.

The United Kingdom has a number of thriving small firms which have based their businesses on the leading edge of technology. They are living proof that it is not necessary to be a big, world-class company such as Glaxo-Wellcome or British Aerospace in order to break new technological ground.

For example, Surrey Satellite Technology operates in a sector traditionally associated with large companies and high price tags. Yet it has built up a valuable and profitable business producing small satellites which perfectly meet the needs of developing countries looking for the benefits which space systems can bring them in such industries as telecommunications. These satellites are both affordable and small enough to piggy-back on the launches of larger satellites.

There are many other examples in the biotechnology and information technology sectors that I hope hon. Members will draw to the House's attention during today's debate.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I thank the Minister for giving way so early in her speech, and congratulate her on securing today's debate. Surrey Satellite Technology is indeed a tremendous company that is to be congratulated on the great strides that it has made in the space industry in Britain. Will the Minister confirm that that company is part of the university, and that its profits help the university's costs, particularly as students will now be facing charges for higher education?

Mrs. Roche: I whole-heartedly concur with the hon. Lady's comments about the importance of a debate, and join her in congratulating the company concerned. She will not be surprised that I do not agree with her concluding remarks, which, if she will forgive me, I found a little muddled.

I am proud to say that the Government have secured the future of higher education by following the proposals so ably made by Sir Ron Dearing. We have a great deal to do to make up for the disastrous state in which the previous Government, of which the hon. Lady was a member, left our education system, but I am so pleased that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has made such a truly remarkable start.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister confirm that the Government have betrayed all students throughout the country by imposing charges for higher education?

Mrs. Roche: Of course not. Again, the hon. Lady seems to be muddled. As it is rather early in the morning, I shall refrain from saying anything more cutting.

The Government are reviewing our education base. We have been elected in circumstances in which 50 per cent. of 11-year-olds entering secondary school are failing the basic average standard in the three Rs. As the hon. Lady was an Education Minister in the previous Government, it is amazing cheek that she has the gall to criticise the present Government's excellent record.

Most hon. Members will be familiar with the buzz-words "benchmarking", "spreading best practice" and "mentoring". They all boil down to one simple message: every company, every public sector body, every educational institution needs to be open and receptive and to take a close look at what is happening not only in its own sector but throughout the country and the world. We all need to learn from each other and from our customers how to be the best. The Government are ambitious for our companies; we want them to compete. That applies to the largest company and to the smallest, to the biotechnology company, newly spun out from a university, and to the small retail business next door to it.

Although most of what needs to be done can be achieved only by business itself and by monitoring best practice and putting it into practical use, the Government have a role in helping to set the right framework and spread the message. The Government are trying to do something that most companies find hard and many commentators regard as an impossibility for politicians: long-term thinking. We are not simply planning for this parliamentary Session, this year or this term. We want real stability in our economic, industrial and regulatory policy. Only when we have achieved that will companies feel able to plan ahead with confidence.

As my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade made clear last month in a speech to a 3M/Confederation of British Industry conference, the message of stability—setting clear goals, making them public and sticking to them—will underlie our approach to the work of the Department of Trade and Industry.

An example of such long-term thinking is the foresight programme led by the Office of Science and Technology. Foresight brings together business, the science base and Government to look at future trends in technologies and markets, their interaction and the challenges they pose for developing new skills, managing change and making future investments. I am sure that the House will agree

[Mrs. Roche]

that, with the coming together of our academic base, industry and Government, we can really provide the climate in which our firms can succeed.

For the next phase of the foresight programme, leading up to 1999, we have set ourselves the challenge of involving companies which have not been touched by the programme so far, and of going deeper into those we have touched. Our ultimate goal is for finance directors to take as much of an interest in the foresight programme as research directors. I understand that there is now some evidence of that taking place.

We need to explore the potential of the supply chain in engaging smaller companies in the foresight programme. Foresight offers the smaller company a unique insight into what their main customers are likely to be demanding from it in five years' time. That is a good example of forward thinking and planning. That trend can strengthen only as large companies out-source more and more of their research and development, as well as their production work, to their suppliers.

If the foresight programme is to have its full effect, it must also play its full role at the heart of Government policy on business competitiveness. That need was recognised in the recent report "The Innovation-Exploitation Barrier", issued by the Select Committee on Science and Technology in another place. In our response to that excellent report, we picked up the need to involve small and medium-sized enterprises in the foresight programme, and the need for more co-ordination in government.

When she took up her post, my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade commissioned an audit of the foresight programme across Whitehall. Its aim was to assess the level of departmental activity and identify areas where more emphasis is required. The audit is one of the benchmarks against which future progress and proposals can be measured. The results of the audit were announced last month, and show that there is still work to be done.

Many Departments believe that a lot more can be done through the foresight programme in setting their priorities and formulating their R and D programmes. A ministerial foresight group has been established to provide top-level co-ordination of the programme across Whitehall. I am sure that that will be warmly welcomed by all hon. Members.

Of course, it would be a mistake to see the foresight programme as our only—or even our main—activity in this area. All aspects of our policy have been developed for the long term, in close consultation with business at every step of the way. We are moving purposefully and very speedily to bring about simpler government and cut red tape, which is a real barrier to growth for small businesses. We need constantly to re-examine our practices and procedures to ensure that we are achieving the right balance between the Government's legitimate role in our society, and heavy-handed bureaucracy.

Let us imagine the benefits which could flow, for example, from the introduction of a single form for collecting information for a range of Departments. At a stroke, we could reduce the paperwork that slows down companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, while cutting out needless duplication of effort in government.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I speak, as I have for many years, as an employer. Is the hon. Lady aware that one of the most obstructive things to small firms' daily life is the business of Government interference in the way in which firms employ people? Does she agree that the Government's decision to sign up to the social chapter, which will inevitably impose more regulations on the way in which small firms take on people, will have a detrimental effect on the growth of small businesses?

Mrs. Roche: No, I do not agree with the hon. Lady. She was part of the governing party in the previous Parliament, so I am sure she was aware—indeed, perhaps she even made representations to the effect—that, at the end of that Government's deregulation initiative, they had created more regulations than they had abolished. So we will take no lectures from the Conservative party about deregulation.

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): Those of us who have staggered out at this unearthly hour on a Friday morning are a little disturbed to find Opposition Members using a debate on innovation to trot out their well-rehearsed, discredited campaign themes. I hope that the rest of the debate will focus on the subject that we are here to discuss.

Mrs. Roche: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I had hoped that the debate would be constructive and civilised. Even though I am in politics, I remain optimistic, and I am looking forward to the rest of this morning's proceedings.

As I was saying, at a stroke, we could reduce the paperwork that slows down companies, especially small and medium-sized enterprises. Although obvious, such things are not necessarily easy—otherwise, of course, they would have been done long ago. Nevertheless, we shall continue to pursue them; that is certainly one of our goals.

Another task that falls to the Government is the creation of a climate that encourages innovation. In the Department of Trade and Industry, that is spearheaded by the innovation unit. The unit is a mixed team of senior secondees from business and the academic world and officials. They work throughout the length and breadth of Britain. Their role is to challenge the status quo, encourage radical thinking and promote changes in culture and behaviour so that innovation becomes the norm in companies and organisations throughout the economy.

Such an approach has paid off. Examples of the unit's achievements include an improved understanding of the process of innovation, which has been widely acclaimed and adopted by both large and small companies; best practice guidelines on longer-term investment and development for use by company management and investors; and the R and D scoreboard, which is a key annual international benchmark for use by companies and investors. The unit is therefore concerned with creating the climate within which innovation can truly flourish.

Another important ingredient of innovation is looking at options for the future. We need strategic thinking—looking to the interests of industries and firms that have not yet been invented. That is why my right hon. Friend

the President of the Board of Trade announced on 23 July that she was considering the establishment of a specialist unit in the DTI. Indeed, I was very struck while listening to her recently speak about future industries. She said that our children and grandchildren would, in the next century, be working in industries of which we had not yet dreamed. I thought that that was a very graphic way of illustrating the tremendous possibilities that investment in innovation can bring.

My right hon. Friend said that she wanted us to develop a much clearer understanding of what the industries and markets of the future, and their particular needs, are likely to be. We need to avoid, as far as possible, taking regulatory decisions now which could limit or kill opportunities for the development of new ideas in the future.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): Does my hon. Friend agree that another exciting initiative is the millennium products venture, in which the creativity of scientists and, especially, young people will be encouraged and rewarded in 2000? No doubt Britain will be at the forefront of some development comparable with penicillin.

Mrs. Roche: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that exciting challenge to the House's attention. I had the great privilege of being with the Prime Minister when he launched the challenge on behalf of the Design Council. What was so exciting about that event was the range of innovation and ideas, both from some of our prestigious large companies and from some small companies. For anybody excited by Britain's future, it was a momentous event. I wish to pay tribute to the Design Council for organising the challenge, and I wish it well.

The innovation unit's role will be to build up an understanding, and to ensure that tomorrow's needs inform the thinking of today's decision makers. A steering group is also being established that will look at the barriers to growth faced by small, technology-based businesses and will co-ordinate action to remove those barriers. It will be supported by the Department of Trade and Industry, the Confederation of British Industry, the Bank of England and the Treasury, and will build on the CBI's excellent "Tech-Stars" report and the Bank of England's "Financing of Technology-Based Small Firms" report.

We hope that the steering group will take a close look not only at the problems these firms can face in raising finance but at issues such as building management teams, developing entrepreneurship and market focus and realising the potential of corporate alliances. The Department is interested in the opportunities for large and small businesses to work together for mutual benefit. All those issues are important to the growth and success of a new firm, and we look forward to practical and useful work coming forward from the steering group.

At the outset, I defined innovation as the successful exploitation of new ideas. All the words in that definition are important, and each is vital for national success. It is well known that British scientists, engineers and inventors have more than their fair share of good and creative ideas. In the past, however, we have not been so strong at turning those ideas into commercially successful products and services that people want to buy. Anybody examining Britain's post-war history would accept that, and I believe that both the British economy and our people are poorer for that.

If we are to continue to create the wealth and employment which will secure the well-being of future generations, we need to ensure that our existing industries remain at the forefront of technical and commercial developments, and that we are in the first wave when a new industry or technology comes into being. Nothing is more dispiriting than to see good British innovation and design developed elsewhere, and the Government intend to address that problem.

The seeds for success need to be planted today, not tomorrow. Primarily, they are planted by our companies and individual entrepreneurs, seeing opportunities and moving quickly and effectively to take them. We are now seeing, in some of our newer industries—for example, biotechnology—serial entrepreneurs who start several successful and creative businesses.

As I said, the Government can create the climate which helps that process, but they cannot make it happen. We need to work in partnership. The Government can, however, play a major role as a collector and disseminator of information about what works and what does not work. The Department of Trade and Industry is in a unique position through its sponsor directorates, and through specialist organisations such as the innovation unit, to carry on a close dialogue with companies and other organisations, and to publicise widely what they tell us.

We have found that the most innovative and successful companies, whatever their size or line of business, exhibit some remarkably similar characteristics: leadership and vision; application of knowledge and developments in science, engineering and technology; constant learning from others; high levels of skill and good people management; and, above all, the development of new or improved products, services and processes which are well designed. They must not only meet but exceed the needs and expectations of customers. One of the most pleasurable aspects of my job is visiting some of those companies, which exhibit some, if not all, of those ingredients—the mystery x-factor that demonstrates the successful, entrepreneurial firm.

To succeed, businesses must embrace both the challenges and opportunities offered by fast-moving and longer-term developments in technology and markets. They must be outward looking. They must develop closer links with the knowledge base, whether world-class university or local further education college. Companies of all sizes will find that that brings direct benefits to their business, as well as helping recruitment strategies and getting products to market more quickly.

Another key recipe for success is to learn from and to seek to emulate the best in the field and to be ambitious. I therefore welcome the CBI's campaign to increase the uptake of benchmarking and best practice. As I said in October, I believe above all that our business links network has the potential to transform the performance of our small businesses.

I want to see the creation of a network of business links that delivers high-quality services to all of the businesses in their communities, but business links can help our companies to be world-class only if the support they provide is itself up to that standard. They will need to

[Mrs. Roche]

refocus their services to become more customer-driven, more creative and more entrepreneurial in style. I set out those performance expectations in the document that I published last month.

We have also asked the accreditation board for business links to make the element of entrepreneurship a key part of the accreditation process. From April 1998, each business link will need to measure its impact on the productivity, profitability and export performance of local business. Results will be published in a national league table, to measure progress and to allow each business link to benchmark its performance.

I want to see all our small and medium-sized businesses becoming learning organisations, able to respond to changes and opportunities in their markets as they arise. I am ambitious for those companies, and they deserve world-class business support. I am confident that our business link network will provide it.

To provide a further source of practical help for small businesses, we launched the enterprise zone on 4 November. It provides firms with easy access through the internet to sources of authoritative business information and advice on, for example, regulations, sources of finance and potential export markets. Key sites have been, and will continue to be, identified by experts and will be linked to the enterprise zone.

Through the enterprise zone, small firms can find the information they need quickly and easily. It will also encourage more of them to use the internet as a source of information. Two thirds already have personal computers and modems and are internet-ready.

Following on from that, greater familiarity with the internet will encourage greater exploitation of its commercial potential, and will make it more attractive for information providers to develop material and tariffs tailored to the needs of small companies. We believe that the enterprise zone is a major step forward, as it not only provides information that companies will find valuable in itself, but provides it in a way that will become increasingly important for them to understand in the IT-based world of the future. We developed that project in opposition, and I am pleased that, in its first few days, it has received such a warm welcome from business.

Because of the recognition that information and communications technologies are increasingly vital to the competitiveness of all firms, small or large, the Government are pressing ahead with the information society initiative programme for business. The ISI brings together a range of support for business, focusing especially on smaller firms. It contains elements to help United Kingdom firms develop the fundamental technologies that underpin the information society, and come up with the innovation and new applications of those technologies that businesses and individuals need. Crucially, it aims to ensure that all United Kingdom firms—

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I am much enjoying the Minister's speech, not least because some of it sounds a little familiar. Will she confirm that the IT for all programme, like the millennium challenge, was developed under the previous Government? Will she accept my congratulations on having the foresight to carry those through?

Mrs. Roche: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I—unlike some of his right hon. and hon. Friends—am always ready to pay tribute to him and to his work. Certainly he developed the initiative for business while he was in government, and I warmly congratulate him on it. We have extended that initiative further, which is why my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade recently announced that she is to make almost an extra £3 million available for it in the current financial year.

However, I am sure that, as the hon. Gentleman has been following closely, he will also know of some of the new initiatives that have been taken under the present Government. I have just described the enterprise zone, which I am sure he will warmly welcome; I have also mentioned the work that we are now doing on the basis of the Confederation of British Industry report and the Bank of England report, and on examining the relationship between large and small companies. There may also be one or two other initiatives by the new Government that will please the hon. Gentleman.

Dr. Gibson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the new deal initiative will be formative and encouraging to young people, who are much better informed about the use of the internet, and that it will encourage them to start new businesses? We are talking about more than keeping new businesses going and extending them; we are concerned with encouraging our bright young people to advance their ideas.

Mrs. Roche: My hon. Friend is right, and one of the key elements of welfare to work and the new deal—one of the possibilities under the employee option—is self-employment, including the appropriate training gateways. That would give a great boost for young people starting their own businesses, and we already know about the great contribution that schemes can make in that regard. Our newest and most creative companies, especially in the high-tech sphere, often consist of very young people making an enormous contribution.

I was talking about advice and information, and about the programme for business. Numerous studies have shown that smaller firms in particular still stand in need of neutral business-oriented information and advice on new technologies. I am therefore especially pleased that there are now nearly 40 ISI—information society initiative—local support centres, based largely on the business link network, helping to provide that service to small firms in their areas, and that more are opening all the time.

Within companies of all kinds, management can provide a lead, set the direction and try to learn from best practice. But even in the smallest company, what turns that into real success is what happens when all the people involved work together. A growing number of businesses are recognising the benefits of unlocking the potential of their people.

In September, we launched the findings of the "Partnerships with People" study. That was carried out jointly with the Department for Education and Employment and 14 other organisations, including the CBI, Investors in People and the TUC. The strong and consistent message

that emerged is that sustained success is earned by organisations which share goals, learning, effort and information, and which share culture with all their people.

A sound education system is also essential to provide people with the necessary education, adaptability and skills to participate in and benefit from partnership in the workplace, and therefore play an effective part in the productivity, innovation and quality that create success. The skills audit showed a deficit in skills across the board compared with our major competitors.

Again, the Government have quickly grasped the initiative. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has begun the process of raising the standard of British education to the level of the best. His White Paper on education, "Excellence in Schools", describes how.

However, it is a mistake to think that we do all our learning in the early years of our life, at school or college. Nationally, we cannot raise our levels of skills fast enough by relying on formal education alone. We shall therefore publish our White Paper on lifelong learning in the autumn. That will include a strategy for the new university for industry, which will be of especial benefit to the smaller business.

It is not only within the company that we need a different perspective on innovation if we are to prosper in the long term. The financial institutions and other investors must play their part, too. There must be a more thorough understanding not only of the risks but of the rewards of investing in new companies. Financial institutions can reduce the risk and increase the reward by encouraging company management that is forward looking, innovative and entrepreneurial, and by providing the right kind of finance to help the company prosper—including, crucially, long-term finance.

The equity gap remains a problem for small businesses, especially for businesses looking for sums smaller than £250,000. Business angels play a key role in bridging that gap. They can also help in other ways. Because so many business angels have a business background, they can often provide hands-on assistance in the running and management of the business. To many small businesses, such help is invaluable.

We are now seeing the creation of technology angels, too. It is important to breach the empathy gap and ensure that everybody understands the new technology. *[Interruption.]* I see that the term "empathy gap" has provoked some discussion on the Opposition Benches. That phrase was first coined by Duncan Matthews, the head of that National Westminster bank's innovation unit. What he meant by it was that the new technology may not always be understood by the financial institutions. That is why it is so important for there to be, as increasingly there is, a good relationship between the financial institutions, the academic world and business. The Government are committed to fostering that partnership approach.

There are currently about 40 business angel networks listed in the leading directory, many of them run by business links. More and more of these are grouping themselves into regional and sub-regional networks. Such co-operation is helpful both to businesses and to investors.

Recently, there has been a great deal of interest in looking at the possible role of a national organisation operating in this field, supported by the DTI, the banks and others. I am pleased that leaders in the field—such as the big five clearing banks and the accountants Kingston Smith—have agreed to work to find a way forward. The DTI fully supports these efforts, and I hope that these discussions lead to an outcome which will command widespread support.

The role of business parks and incubator centres is important, and many of our future high-technology small and medium-sized enterprises will spring from them. In our response to the report on the innovation-exploitation barrier, we have highlighted this issue. We are supporting the UK business incubation centre through sector challenge, which will promote the role of business incubation and help to spread best practice.

We are contributing to a study of the growth of small and medium-sized firms in the Cambridge area, a follow-up to work on the Cambridge phenomenon in the 1980s. We hope to be able to chart the development of the sector in this area, to identify the factors which encourage growth, and to isolate and tackle those which obstruct it. Apart from the excellent university and the science and technical base at Cambridge, there are business angel networks which can provide an understanding of the commercial possibilities of the new technologies. I hope that hon. Members agree that this is a practical response to a helpful and thorough report.

No debate on innovation would be complete without a discussion of our world-class science and engineering base. The Government recognise its importance to our national competitiveness and social aspirations, both through its traditional curiosity-driven research and through the increasing proportion of research which more explicitly has the potential to underpin wealth creation and quality of life. Nor must we forget the contribution made through the education and training of skilled people, who can operate at every level in the work force. That ability is striking in some of the creative companies.

Dr. Gibson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the big debate on the science base arises from 18 years of destruction by the previous Government? Has not the Dearing report addressed the problems of how to restore the excellent science base, how to invest in it and how to educate young people up to the correct standard? Every meeting that I have attended this week, including meetings at SmithKline Beecham and the Foundation for Science, has addressed the problem of the erosion of the science base after 18 years of Tory government.

Mrs. Roche: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to him for his distinguished work. As the House knows, he is an eminent scientist. One of the very exciting things about the Dearing report is the emphasis it places on some of the things that I have talked about, including encouraging entrepreneurship, the creation of new companies, and the partnership between the financial community and the academic base.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Much as I like the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), his comments about the destruction of the science base in this country over the past 18 years were absolutely outrageous. He knows as well as I do about the Norwich research park, which is an outstanding example of a scientific

[Mr. David Prior]

development working with the private sector. You ought to withdraw your support for the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Mrs. Roche: I must say to the hon. Gentleman—using that wonderful time-honoured phrase "with the greatest respect"—that I do not agree with him, and that I do agree with my hon. Friend. During the past 18 years—despite the record of the previous Government—there have been examples of individual excellence, but we have a long way to go to make up the deficiencies of that Government.

Dr. Gibson: The Norwich research park was fighting for its permanent existence after the prior options review instituted by the previous Government. There was much lobbying within the House and elsewhere to maintain the science base. Although the research park came through, it had a tremendous fight to maintain its excellence, and it was under pressure.

Mrs. Roche: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I am sure that, as the morning progresses, there will be further discussion.

It is of little or no use for the science and engineering base to produce world-class ideas if our companies lack the capacity to exploit them, and a key element in that capacity is having access to the right people with the right skills. As one of the industrialists in the innovation unit has said, the best vehicle for technology transfer walks on two feet. Companies and educational institutions alike need to see the benefits of working together, and to remain in close dialogue about the precise nature of their skills needs and the ways in which they can be fulfilled.

Mrs. Gorman: Does the Minister agree that one of the most significant ways in which people learn skills is by working in an organisation and that this particularly applies to people with relatively low skills and poor education? Does she further agree that her Government's policy of introducing a minimum wage will prevent those people from taking a job at a modest wage as a way of paying for their education in skills?

Mrs. Roche: I do not accept what the hon. Lady says about the minimum wage, which I see as aiding competitiveness. That is why small firms welcome the minimum wage. But I agree that companies investing in the skills training of their work force can be productive, and I agree also that that can make a remarkable contribution. It helps employee retention, which can be helpful to productivity and profitability. Although the hon. Lady and I will not agree on the minimum wage, we can agree about the importance of employee training.

Deserved credit is due to our science base, but I believe that it must do yet more to seize every opportunity to be even more outward looking, particularly as far as small firms are concerned. The DTI attempts to improve this interaction through schemes and in less formal ways. The teaching company scheme, for example, now aims explicitly at meeting the needs of small and medium firms through its network of regional centres.

We are midway through a study of the key ingredients which make collaborations between higher education and industry successful. When it is published early in 1998, we hope that it will be a useful and practical tool for both parties to use when they are thinking about working together.

I also applaud the efforts of the organisations representing company research directors and university industrial liaison officers, which have produced a step-by-step guide to establishing successful research partnerships. Such initiatives help to demystify the whole process, allowing the rich benefits of working with the science and engineering base to be fully realised to the benefit of all involved.

It is satisfying to visit a small company with few employees which has excellent relationships with its local university. Where there is an exchange of information and students, the small company gains in terms of product development and an enhancement of its productivity.

The Government are committed to forging partnerships for the future involving firms of all sizes and our world-class science and technology base, with the Government acting as catalyst and facilitator. I am confident that these partnerships will grow and develop. Through working together and constantly strengthening the links between us, we are laying the foundations for the country's future prosperity. Innovation and small firms are at the heart of achieving this. I firmly believe that the Government's partnership approach can only add to the competitiveness of our firms, and can truly create a situation in which we can win for Britain.

10.18 am

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): There is no more important part of the business community than the small business sector. Ninety-nine per cent. of all UK businesses employ fewer than 50 people. They produce a third of the nation's output and provide half our private sector jobs. In a lengthy and well-intentioned speech, the Minister has given only one side of the story.

The Minister is not in isolation: every single Government Department has an interest in small businesses, and the previous Government appointed a Minister for small businesses in each and every Department. I tabled a question on 3 November asking the Minister to list the Ministers responsible for small businesses in each Government Department and the dates of their appointment, but I received no reply. Is there still such a Minister in every Department?

Mrs. Roche: No, there is not. I should be interested to know what that ministerial group achieved. It certainly did not prevent over-regulation. I said in response to the hon. Lady's written question that I had bilateral meetings on important issues for small business with all my ministerial colleagues, and I told her that the Access Business ministerial group, situated in the Cabinet Office, deals with the very issue of cutting red tape. We aim for a record that will far outstrip the previous Government's.

Mrs. Gillan: From that response it is clear that some Departments have no Minister responsible for small businesses, so of course the hon. Lady could not tell us, as I asked, when they met or what they discussed.

Mrs. Roche: What were the achievements of the earlier ministerial group?

Mrs. Gillan: The Minister knows that she is in government and we are in opposition; it is she who has to answer questions.

Why was the decision taken not to have a Minister responsible for small businesses in each Department? We can already see the problems that the Government have created for small businesses. Earlier this week, I received a worrying fax from Sonic Communications, a small company that exports and produces video communications technology, particularly in connection with security.

The company's managing director had received a letter dated 10 September from the Home Office. It said:

"Dear David,

I am writing to advise you that, following a recent decision by the Home Secretary, the Home Office Exports Initiative will be withdrawn after just over a year to cease at 31 October.

Together with the trade associations representing the security industry, APPSS and BSIA, I am endeavouring urgently to find alternative ways to support the exporting efforts from this growth industry sector."

Did the Minister know that the Home Office exports initiative was being withdrawn? Did the Home Office contact her?

Mrs. Roche: Of course I have contacts with other Ministers. As the hon. Lady will know, the export forum, which has just published a report, is considering all aspects of export promotion, in co-operation with industry. She has, if I may say so, rather a cheek. It was the Government of which she was a member who caused great consternation and dismay to exporting companies by their action on trade support for export fairs. One of the first actions of my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade on her appointment was to reverse that decision. That was widely welcomed by our exporters. The hon. Lady may like to think again.

Mrs. Gillan: What a load of tosh. The Minister could not give the straight answer, no, to the written question whether there was a Minister responsible for small businesses in every Department, and she has not answered the question that I just asked her: was she consulted by the Home Office before the initiative was withdrawn? Does she consider that 51 days are enough? Is the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), responsible for small businesses in that Department as part of the group that she has set up? Did he consult her in any way, shape or form before small businesses had the rug pulled from under them by the abolition of the export initiative?

Mrs. Roche: It may be a little early for the hon. Lady, but she must not get into such a muddle. She is talking about a group not having met, but I have already told her that I have bilateral meetings with fellow Ministers on issues of importance to small businesses and that we have set up the Access Business ministerial group. I assume that she is advancing the Opposition's proposals on the subject, but when I asked her to list the achievements of the ministerial group to which she referred, there was a resounding no.

Mrs. Gillan: It is clear from the Minister's furious interventions that she did not know that the initiative for business existed in the Home Office and was not consulted before a small firm was informed that the initiative was being cut. She should immediately contact her opposite number in the Home Office to find out what is going on.

The Association of Police and Public Security Suppliers wrote to the Department of Trade and Industry on 28 August, saying:

"You may not be aware of a very recent development affecting the Home Office Exports Initiative . . . which is that the Minister, Alun Michael, is closing the initiative as from the end of October 1997."

That is exactly right: the Minister is obviously not aware. The letter continues:

"Whilst committed financial support will be honoured, the ambitions of the Trade Associations and the security industry are, nevertheless, being left hanging.

This move is extremely disappointing to APPSS and, of course, the security industry. As a result of analysis we carried out during this year's Embassy exhibitions, which were supported by the Home Office initiative and by DTI country desks, I recently presented evidence to the Home Office committee of clearly identifiable business returns to industry and therefore to our national export drive, especially in Europe.

We have indications on file of new business arising from our Vienna, Madrid and Stockholm/Helsinki events this year."

Dr. Palmer: Does the hon. Lady intend to address the subject of innovation before her speech ends?

Mrs. Gillan: I am awfully grateful for that intervention. It is difficult to see how firms can innovate against this background, and I intend to provide more illustrations of the problems that small firms will face.

The bottom line is that the Minister did not know that the initiative existed, or what was happening to it. She told us that she had had no meetings with any of her colleagues in other Departments; yet she is the Minister responsible for small business.

Mrs. Roche: It is only 10.27 am, so the hon. Lady is still a little muddled, but if she had been listening carefully, she would have heard that I said only a few minutes ago that I did indeed meet my ministerial colleagues on small business issues. May I also tell her that I am never furious?

Mrs. Gillan: I thought that you just said—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. That is the second time this morning that an hon. Member has not addressed the Chair correctly. I should be grateful if all hon. Members remembered how to do so.

Mrs. Gillan: Please accept my unreserved apology, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I believe that the Minister said that the Access Business ministerial group had not yet met but, after all, it is quite early in the morning for her, too.

Mrs. Gorman: Does my hon. Friend agree that all these Government initiatives are very worthy, but that in the end most small firms do not go to the Government for help when they set up; they do it on their own? The one thing that they do not want is the Government breathing down their necks when they are trying to get up and get going. The proposed new Government regulations will have a devastating effect on that initiative.

Mrs. Gillan: My hon. Friend is right, and later I shall come to the devastating effect that the Government's

[Mrs. Gillan]

policies will have on small businesses. I suppose that as no Ministers are appointed to be responsible for small businesses in Government Departments, no Minister at the Department of Social Security will be taking on board the interests of small businesses.

This week, I received another letter. It was from Pocketbond Ltd., which makes plastic models and is an innovative and successful company. The letter was to inform me about a matter on which the company has also written to the Minister. I do not believe that, as yet, it has received a reply. The company writes about the Contributions Agency and the imposition of national insurance contributions, which are targeted at small businesses and not payable by big business.

The company is small and has two employees. As it was so small, it was not possible for it to join a company private health insurance scheme, which usually requires at least three to five employees, to provide an employee—who happened to be the managing director of Pocketbond—with private health insurance. It was necessary for him to purchase his insurance in his own name, and the cost was passed on to the company for reimbursement. The Contributions Agency is now claiming that national insurance is due on those BUPA payments, solely because they were invoiced not to the company but to the man himself. BUPA is not subject to national insurance when provided to an employee through a company scheme, but the agency claimed that it must be subject to such contributions if invoiced in the man's name. The managing director writes:

"This means we are 'taxed' extra via NI contributions because we are a small company."

I do not expect the Minister to remember that case, but as it seems to be an inequality and an unfairness faced by a small business, I ask her to give an undertaking that she will undertake to look into it, reply to Mr. Brook of Pocketbond and see what she can do to champion the cause of an obviously successful small business that has been discriminated against. I hope that she will give me that undertaking.

Mrs. Roche: Of course, I take letters written by any small business to me very seriously. As I explained, I see my role as meeting colleagues and liaising with them. I am pleased that the hon. Lady is promoting the profile of small firms and talking about the regulatory burdens on them. Will she, therefore, condemn the record of the Government of which she was a member in the previous Parliament, as they over-regulated and added to the burdens on small firms, contrary to the deregulation initiative that they introduced?

Mrs. Gillan: I wish that the Minister would grow up. She keeps on believing that she is still in opposition and that I have to answer the questions. She has to answer the questions, and the sooner she gets used to it, the better. I am grateful, however, for her undertaking to look into this case. Will she also give an undertaking that she will find out whether a Minister in the Department of Social Security can be appointed to be responsible for the affairs of small businesses, otherwise matters pertaining to them will certainly disappear into obscurity, as they have obviously done in that Department and in the Home Office?

The small business brief is interesting. As the Minister said, one of the most exciting things about it is meeting small business men and women who have been successful—but the Government are seeking to stifle the innovation and progress of small businesses.

I have here another letter. This time, it is from my constituency, from Mr. Wing who works with composers. It sums up what our small businesses are facing. It was addressed not to me, but to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. As yet, no reply has been forthcoming. I think that all three letters to which I have referred are still awaiting responses—so much for the rapid reaction to the problems of small businesses. Mr. Wing writes:

"I have just received a letter from one of the companies that I have a pension with advising me that because of your new tax rules that crept in shortly after the election my pension may not produce the required income. Further they warned me that you might be thinking of abolishing higher rate tax relief on pension contributions. I would appreciate three straight answers ie yes or no to the following questions:

1 Will the tax changes on dividends you introduced reduce the value of my pension bearing in mind my pension is invested in a managed fund.

2 Are you considering reducing the higher rate tax relief on pension contributions.

3 If you do reduce tax relief, have you further plans to tax the self-employed.

As a self-employed person, I have no employer to contribute any monies to my pension and therefore have to provide my own pension. Those who are employed pay no tax on their employer's pensions contributions. As a self-employed person I receive no sickness payment when I am ill and therefore have to pay for an insurance to cover any illness for which I receive no tax relief. Those who are employed pay no tax on their employer's sickness contributions other than tax on received income.

As a self-employed person I cannot afford to be ill and if I have to have medical attention it has to be at a time to suit me ie I must be able to plan my illness and schedule any operation to fit my schedule as the state will not help me. I therefore pay for private health and whilst I am not asking for tax relief on this as it is my right to have the choice, I would point out that, to date, hospital bills etc. for my family have been over £65,000 in the last three years. This is £65,000 that the NHS has not had to spend on my family."

Mr. Stephen Timms (East Ham): I was interested to hear the hon. Lady's constituency correspondence, but I wonder whether she will now come to the subject of the debate, which is innovation in small businesses.

Mrs. Gillan: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman does not like what I am talking about—the barriers and the stifling that small businesses are facing and will face.

Mr. Wing continued:

"As a self-employed person I get the distinct impression that New Labour sees the hard working self-employed as a bottomless pit from which you can keep taking without replacing. Yet it is the self-employed who are creating work for others and thus keeping many people in work. I may be a small business, my business has a turnover of under £400,000 and I end up with a surplus of around £40,000. I work approx 80 to 100 hours a week with two weeks holiday. I pay out to other self-employed people in excess of £250,000. Whilst these figures are obviously very small in relation to the economy, they are important and vital to me and those who I engage."

My constituent goes on to talk about living in Haringey in north London, where education standards are poor, and he had little option but to move or have his children privately educated. The letter continues in a vein that

shows me that a small business person is absolutely terrified by what has already happened under this Labour Government and by what will happen.

Let us look at what the Minister's Government have done for small businesses. We have had five interest rate rises—the last one was yesterday. If the Minister were running a small business, what would she think of a Government who have delivered five interest rate rises in as many months? What can our small businesses look forward to—the extending of the parental leave directive and a minimum wage with no exemptions? I was grateful to the Minister, who wrote to me on 18 September in reply to a question that I had asked, on whether our small and micro businesses could be excluded from the minimum wage. Her reply stated:

"No exemptions are envisaged for small businesses."

Mrs. Roche: Would the hon. Lady care to read the rest of that letter? It might help.

Mrs. Gillan: I am happy to place the letter on record, although I shall certainly not go through it chapter and verse. The last paragraph states:

"You also asked whether micro and small businesses will be excluded from the minimum wage proposals. No exemptions are envisaged for small businesses."

It is quite clear in black and white.

Mrs. Roche: Go on.

Mrs. Gillan: The Minister adds that there will be a "wide ranging consultation exercise", but the earlier sentence presumes that there will be no exemptions for small businesses. I cannot see how she can wriggle out of that.

Mrs. Roche: The House will have noticed the hon. Lady's reluctance to read the rest of that paragraph. May I invite her to do so?

Mrs. Gillan: The letter states:

"You also asked whether micro and small businesses will be excluded from the minimum wage proposals. No exemptions are envisaged for small businesses. However, in formulating its recommendation to Government on the initial level at which a minimum wage might be set, the Low Pay Commission will undertake a wide ranging consultation exercise which will include the small business sector."

Mrs. Roche *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Gillan: That sentence does not affect the fact that the Minister said:

"No exemptions are envisaged for small businesses."

I have now read the letter to the end. I do not believe that that has added to the argument at all. It shows that she has prejudged the matter. Small businesses will not be exempted, but they will be consulted. That is hardly a great comfort to small businesses.

Mrs. Gorman: In endorsing my hon. Friend's concern about the introduction of the minimum wage, we must not let the House run away with the idea that small firms pay only small wages. Some of the worst payers are the great nationalised industries, such as the health service. It would be interesting if the Minister told us a little bit in her reply about what the Government will do to find the money to improve the wages of people in the health service.

Mrs. Gillan: That would be interesting, and we look forward to it.

What do small businesses face under this Government? They have already faced the interest rate rises and the raid on pensions. They will have to extend parental leave to paternity leave. We have established that there will be no exemptions from the minimum wage. The working time directive, the telephone tax, the fossil fuel tax and the new workers councils are all coming in. At the same time, small businesses will have to go through millennium compliance and euro preparations. My goodness, am I glad that I am not in small business today. With this weight of legislation and all the impositions of this Government on them, small businesses will have a difficult job innovating in that climate.

Mrs. Roche: The hon. Lady has been very courteous in giving way. I did not catch what she meant by "millennium compliance". What is she suggesting?

Mrs. Gillan: It may have struck the hon. Lady that we are approaching 2000, and businesses are having to undergo millennium compliance, which takes time, effort and money.

Mrs. Roche: I agree. That is why the Government take the century date change problem seriously and why we have launched Action 2000 under the chairmanship of Don Cruickshank, whose appointment was announced recently. I think that the House was confused because the hon. Lady seemed to be saying that the problem was a Government regulation or to be implying that it was the Government's fault. I know that the Government's reach is far, but I did not think that our powers extended there.

Mrs. Gillan: The hon. Lady has confused herself. She had better go back to sleep. I know that it was difficult for her to read her official speech so fluently this morning.

All the regulations that the Government are imposing on small companies at the same time as they are having to deal with unavoidable millennium compliance and euro preparations mean that untenable burdens are being placed on our small businesses. The Government have not thought it through. I am most disappointed about the lack of exemptions for small businesses, especially in respect of the minimum wage.

Mr. Timms: The hon. Lady encouraged the House in the 24th minute of her speech by mentioning innovation. Perhaps she could turn her attention to that, which is the subject of the debate.

Mrs. Gillan: The title is "Innovation and the Role of Small Firms"; I am discussing the role of small business. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I find it impertinent that the hon. Gentleman should try to do your job for you. I believe that I have been in order throughout my speech, otherwise you would have leapt to your feet.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that it would be sensible if we got on with the debate.

Mrs. Gillan: When I wrote to the Minister about exemptions for small business, I wanted to her to take

[Mrs. Gillan]

some lessons from the American system. I hope that she will reconsider her response. It is important that our small businesses receive an exemption. In the United States, firms whose annual turnover is less than $500,000 are exempt from the Fair Labour Standards Act 1938. Firms with fewer than 50 employees are exempt from the Family and Medical Leave Act 1993, which provides for 12 weeks' unpaid leave for serious illness, or for the birth or adoption of a child. I trust that when she examines the parental leave directive and looks again at the minimum wage, she will consider exempting small businesses.

The one thing that the Government have done for small businesses is to produce a Green Paper on late payment of debt. The Government intend to legislate along those lines. I am surprised that that is the only tangible product from the Department of Trade and Industry for small firms. It is great hypocrisy that the Government should be considering legislation, which many small businesses do not want or regard as necessary, when they should be putting their own house in order. I tabled some written questions on the matter. I again received poor replies, which did not tell me how many bills were outstanding in various Government Departments. I did, however, get a detailed reply from the Department of Health about NHS trusts. I was very worried by what I received.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): My hon. Friend is saying something of the greatest importance. She is right to castigate late-paying Government Departments, but is not the late payment of debt to small companies a very serious problem for them, especially if they have only one or two suppliers, some of which are large companies that are deliberate late payers? While being critical of Government Departments, will she think long and hard about whether she should oppose in principle legislation in this area, because many small business men would welcome it?

Mrs. Gillan: I have no problem with my hon. Friend's remarks. If businesses are to innovate and grow, they cannot face having large sums being owed to them, especially by Government Departments

Mrs. Roche: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Gillan: No, I am coming to the end. I have been most generous in giving way.

The figure given to me in the written answer was that NHS trusts pay 3 million bills every quarter but that while 80 per cent. are paid on time, 20 per cent. are not. That means that 600,000 late payments were made in the first quarter of this year. If one extrapolates that figure over the year, it reveals that 2,400,000 bills are paid late by NHS trusts to other companies. Instead of producing Green Papers, consulting and murmuring warm words to small businesses, surely the Minister should visit Government Departments to find out about the payment records of her colleagues.

Let me return to my opening remarks: the Government have removed ministerial responsibility for small businesses from each and every Department and instead created an ad hoc group. The Department of Trade and Industry does not know what is going on in other Departments that affect small business, and it is now about to embark on one of the greatest tranches of legislation governing the business community that we have ever witnessed. How on earth can our businesses thrive and contribute to the economy if they are stifled by the Government? The Minister needs to go back to the drawing board and to look at affairs closer to home before she continues her brief. Before legislation is brought before the House, she needs to ensure that she has cleaned up her own Government's act.

I hope that the Minister will offer us some replies to those questions when she winds up the debate, but I am afraid that, in common with her answers to previous questions, she will offer us poor or no answers today.

10.50 am

Mr. Stephen Timms (East Ham): We have just listened to a remarkable speech by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan). The subject of the debate is innovation and the role of small firms and the context for it is the Government's response to the third report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, which was published last month. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has read it or is even aware of its existence. Certainly, she made no reference to it and we are none the wiser as to whether she supports or disagrees with the Government's response to it.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry on her achievements and the extent to which she has established the Labour party as the party that listens to and speaks up for Britain's small businesses.

Just after the election, I attended a seminar organised by Barclays bank at Dartford, held to brief the bank's small business customers on the single currency. It was attended by about 60 representatives who without exception believed that Britain would join the single currency as a matter of course in the interests of the British economy and of their businesses.

We know from the events of the past couple of weeks that that view is shared by the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), and by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), who is in his place this morning and who found it necessary to resign from the Opposition Front Bench over the issue. Their view on the single currency is overwhelmingly shared by small businesses up and down the country, but it has been rejected by the current powers that be in the Opposition.

On issue after issue the Conservative party has ceased to listen to small businesses.

Mrs. Gillan: May I ask a question in the same vein as the hon. Gentleman's intervention on me? When are you going to get down to talking about innovation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Can we be rather more careful with our parliamentary language, as it does help the debate?

Mr. Timms: I will be pleased to concentrate most of my remarks on the subject of innovation, but a response is required to the lengthy speech that we have just heard from the hon. Lady.

Not only has the Conservative party ceased to listen to small businesses: on the single currency, it has ceased to listen to the big businesses represented by the Confederation of British Industry. From the Labour party perspective a fascinating change has occurred.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Is the hon. Gentleman not aware that the Forum of Private Business and the Institute of Directors, the former representing small businesses and the latter representing large businesses, are against the single currency?

Mr. Timms: I am well aware of the view of the small business representatives to whom I have spoken, and the view of the CBI, which is shared by the hon. Member for Esher and Walton, who is sitting next to the hon. Lady. That view is very different from the dogmatic view taken by the Conservative party.

My hon. Friend the Minister has been listening to small businesses. She spoke at a remarkable and successful occasion which I attended during the recess—a small business dinner organised by the Greater London Labour party. We used not to have such dinners, but this one was highly successful and well attended. What struck me was the extremely high regard in which my hon. Friend was held by the representatives who were present. What was particularly striking about that occasion was the number of those present who had previously supported the Conservative party—indeed, the person sitting next to me at that Labour party dinner was a full-time Conservative party agent.

The remarkable attendance at that dinner was a striking illustration of the way in which the perception of the parties among small businesses has been reversed in the past couple of years. In large measure that is due to the work of my hon. Friend. The Conservative party has abandoned its previous stance as the party that listens to small businesses. It prefers instead to rush headlong down an ideological cul-de-sac, which is destined to confine it to the margins of politics for years to come.

This week, I was delighted when my hon. Friend the Minister and my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade found time to visit my borough of Newham in east London to launch a new enterprise zone website for small businesses. As my hon. Friend said in her speech, that launch took place at the university of east London small business centre at Stratford. My hon. Friend opened that centre a few months ago and it has proved an enormous success as a resource for small businesses in east London. That is an example of the beneficial changes that are taking place in the economy of east London, and I pay tribute to the successful initiative of Martin Laycock and his team. The centre is a symbol of innovation in small business and it was a fitting place for the Government website for small business to be launched.

There was an interesting earlier exchange in the debate about the state of the science base in the United Kingdom. Although the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham made no reference to the third report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, it is from that report that the debate arises. It is worth noting the Committee's views on the state of the science base because they reflect the view of my hon. Friend the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson).

Paragraph 3.7 of that report notes that the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has argued:

"British companies are increasingly looking abroad for new research partners because they consider the UK science base is declining through under-investment."

The report also notes that the ABPI

"finds the UK science base increasingly wanting."

At paragraph 3.8, the Committee notes:

"we believe that there is growing evidence that some multi-national companies based in this country are re-siting collaborative research overseas in the light of concern about the research infrastructure in the United Kingdom."

That point was alluded to earlier by my hon. Friend the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North.

Mr. Ian Taylor: These are complex matters, which is why I objected to rather trivial earlier interventions. I, too, have spoken to representatives of the industry, one of whose biggest problems is the increasing complexity and cost of the equipment required to carry out top-quality research at our best universities. I very much doubt whether the Labour Government have got to grips with those matters, which, while not insuperable, require close collaboration with the industry if they are to be overcome. There is a requirement on industry to do more in terms of the equipment at its laboratories, and for a more elitist approach, concentrated on certain excellent centres of research within our university system.

Mr. Timms: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and pay tribute to his work in this field as a member of the previous Government. I accept that these are complex matters, but my point is that the United Kingdom science base is in a parlous state and we are losing investment as a result. The Government should turn their attention to that in a way that the previous Government failed to do.

Dr. Palmer: I have seen this problem from the other end of the spectrum, having worked in management of a Swiss pharmaceutical company. I asked one of the senior directors whether the company was thinking of expanding its investment in Britain, in view of Britain's relatively low wage levels. He said that it was always nice to pay low wages, but that the industry's primary consideration was whether a country's educational standards and infrastructure were adequate. Wage levels, although a factor in decision making, are not decisive; companies are happy to pay high wages if they get the best people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions are gradually getting longer. A large number of Back Benchers want to speak today—including the hon. Gentleman—so could he now briefly put his question?

Dr. Palmer: My question is whether my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) would agree that the problems of the pharmaceutical industry and of

[Dr. Palmer]

industry generally under the previous Government have been a significant factor in encouraging overseas investment.

Mr. Timms: I thank my hon. Friend for making a telling point and I agree with him. The issue of the research infrastructure ought to be at the centre of this debate and I shall concentrate on that subject during the remainder of my speech.

My central point in welcoming the Government response to the House of Lords Select Committee report concerns the problem facing small businesses that want to exploit innovation and research coming from Britain's universities. How do we ensure that that research, much of which is of high quality, is accessible to Britain's pharmaceutical and other businesses?

Large firms can buy research by entering into contracts with universities, but that option is not available to small businesses because there is no mechanism in the UK for packaging university research work for access by small companies. In other countries, the position differs greatly: in Germany, for example, every town has its Fraunhofer institute where companies of any size can buy into research programmes. The Government response to the Select Committee report argues effectively that, if we are to help our small business sector to be more innovative, we need to deepen the links between our small businesses and our universities. I warmly welcome that response and what the Minister has said today, but how can we give our small businesses access to high-quality research? How can we provide the missing research infrastructure so as to enable small companies to benefit from innovations being developed in our universities? If the next industrial era is to be an information age, the extension and exploitation of the knowledge base will be crucial. The Government have recognised the importance of links between universities and industry and intend to encourage their development, so it must be right to develop links between small businesses and universities.

I agree with the Select Committee report that strong and innovative industry is best organised in clusters—whether in the potteries or in silicon valley—which allow firms to sharpen each other's competitiveness and pull in the skills and support services the firms need, in turn strengthening the cluster. Higher education helps industrial clusters to develop, not only by providing links to research, but by investing in the production of entrepreneurial graduates—young people whose studies turn into business ideas and who are then actively encouraged to found new companies. The strongest industry-university links are also regionally based and some colleges and universities need to rediscover their regional roles in society and the economy.

I am especially concerned about strengthening the innovative capacity of small businesses in London. The London Planning Advisory Committee's report "Technology Parks in London" included universities as central partners in the development of the high-quality, high-technology science parks we need if we are to encourage London businesses to be innovators.

Mrs. Gorman: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that science and technology play an important role. Will he also remember that many entrepreneurs, for example, Alan Sugar of Amstrad and Dyson and his magic hoover—I have one, but it is not called a hoover, of course—are people who learned on the job? We must not block the entry of such people both into work and into innovation by loading them down with Government regulations and controls. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that we must keep the field open and make sure that the Government stay off their backs?

Mr. Timms: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady. That is an important point and my hon. Friend the Minister is also committed to that approach.

My point is that there is much innovation in our universities that is not finding its way to commercial exploitation. Today's debate must be about how we can change that so that small businesses have access to that innovation and can exploit it commercially, in the way that the companies that the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) mentioned have done so successfully. The example that occurs to me is that of Psion, the London-based manufacturer that has raised several of the points relating to access to innovation and university work. Universities can themselves stimulate the creation of new companies; that has happened in Norwich and Cambridge and we should encourage it more widely.

I welcome the points relating to science parks in the Government response. The United Kingdom Science Park Association sets out as its objectives:

"to promote university/industry linkages and the transfer of technology; to promote the formation of high technology firms; to attract firms involved in leading edge technologies; to create new jobs."

I am pleased to hear from the Minister that there is to be a review of the lessons of the Cambridge phenomenon and the experience surrounding the Cambridge science park.

Nearly 10 years ago, I chaired a seminar for interested parties in London to consider how London might learn the lessons arising from the Cambridge phenomenon; but in the 10 years since then, progress has been slow. It is astonishing that London has only 7 per cent. of the quantity of technology park floor space that Birmingham has; and London's quantity of technology park floor space is pathetic when compared with that of any major European city. Technology parks elsewhere in the UK have largely been developed by universities on vacant university land, but London's universities do not own vacant land, so it is not physically possible for them to follow the successful examples of Cambridge, Surrey and Heriot-Watt.

Mr. Prior: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that, when looking at London, one has to take into account the City of London, which is probably the most innovative financial centre in the world and is leading the world in a range of financial services and insurance products?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, but there is also a large manufacturing sector in London. I am told that there are more people working in manufacturing in London than in the whole of the northern region. It is therefore vitally important that the businesses that employ those people are innovative and the Government are rightly turning their attention to how that can be achieved.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham mentioned Surrey university. Yesterday, many of us received a letter celebrating 10 years of success from the Surrey research park, which is based at the university of Surrey at Guildford. Dr. Malcolm Parry, general manager of the park, makes the point that

"the Park benefits the Local Community and County in a number of very significant ways, for example, by the creation of approximately 3,000 high quality jobs and attracting more than £300 million to the regional economy."

That sort of example should be replicated much more widely in London.

Earlier this year, the *Estates Gazette* had an article about the state of technology parks in London. It made the point that London is still short of science park space, but that there are schemes in the pipeline that could fill the gap. It says:

"One year after the Government Office for London and the London Planning Advisory Committee concluded that a minimum of 200,000 sq m of technology park floorspace was needed in London, only two small schemes have been established—at Brunel University, Uxbridge, and at . . . South Bank University.

GOU's research had found that, compared with other major UK and world cities, London was underprovided.

The report . . . envisaged 10-15 science parks being set up in London, most of them on no more than 10ha, but with two or three big enough to attract inward investment."

The article goes on to quote one of the sector's specialists, who says:

"There is a very real opportunity to combine the skill and experience of science parks in fostering science and technology with the much better approach to master planning, estate development and management marketing found on businesses parks."

One hopeful initiative is the London science park at Dartford. A few weeks ago, I participated in a seminar at the big Glaxo Wellcome pharmaceutical campus in Dartford, hosted by the Member of the European Parliament for Kent, West. Glaxo Wellcome submitted evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee. At the seminar, I met Professor John Parsonage of Greenwich university, the chair of the science and technology parks London group, who is working at Glaxo Wellcome. He is also the chief executive of the London science park initiative.

The university has made an interesting and exciting proposal: a campus for 10,000 students, situated next to a science park, which will be developed on the successful business park model. I commend Greenwich university's work in seeking to develop close links between research and industry, particularly in small businesses, which hold the key to economic development in the Thames gateway area—that whole swathe of land from Canary wharf, where the Prime Minister is attending the Anglo-French summit today, through east London to north Kent, which will be linked by the high-speed rail link to the channel tunnel. That whole region holds immense potential for the innovative small business sector.

A few yards from where my hon. Friend the Minister launched the small business website earlier this week, at the university of east London, detailed planning is under way for the Thames gateway technology centre, which won £8 million in single regeneration budget funding and is an excellent example of the sort of initiative that we need to encourage. It will provide vital research and development support to small east London manufacturing businesses, in partnership with the university of east London and other universities.

The centre plans to bring together research centres throughout the university, allowing them to strengthen each other through co-location, and placing them at a new site in the royal docks alongside a new business park, which will attract innovative small businesses to locate in it. It will pull together the centres for electrical and electronic engineering, manufacturing engineering, product design, information technology, media and communications, graphic design, fashion and marketing and textile design. The aim is to package what is coming out of all those units so that it can be accessed by small businesses. That is the way to stimulate innovation among those businesses, which is what this debate is all about.

I welcome the Government's response to the House of Lords Select Committee report. The new Britain that the Government are building requires innovation and much of the innovation that we need will have to come from small businesses. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham was right to draw attention to the importance of the scale of the small business contribution to the British economy. We need those businesses to be innovative. That is what my hon. Friend the Minister was speaking about in launching the Government's response, but there is much to be done to facilitate it. The Government have made an excellent start and I commend their response to the House of Lords Select Committee report and what my hon. Friend the Minister has said this morning.

11.14 am

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): I declare the outside interests that appear in the Register of Members' Interests, which have some relevance to the broad debate.

I can happily truncate my speech, partly by referring to the debate in the House on British invention and innovation on 1 May 1996 at column 1061, which was initiated by the then hon. Member for Dover—the textual analysis of what I said then would bear some resemblance to what the Minister said this morning. Despite differences that we may have on various issues, there is a continuity between my work as Minister for Science and Technology and the Minister's work. I pay tribute to those aspects.

It is important, particularly for smaller businesses, that that there is continuity in initiatives started under one Government, when the electorate, in my judgment unwisely, decided that we should come to Opposition Benches and that the Labour party should occupy Government Benches. Many business men and women whom I have seen since the election are pleased that those initiatives are still there, and that the applications for the various challenges can continue.

The other reason why I can truncate my remarks is that I suspect that some of my colleagues will be eloquent in their criticisms of the Government in relation to the policies into which they may wander, particularly now that they have signed up to the social chapter. I can leave my colleagues to pick up those points.

I want to highlight the challenges that business faces, particularly smaller business. Fifty-three per cent. of the work force work in companies employing 100 people or fewer, and 98 per cent. of all companies have 20 or fewer employees. It is therefore crucial that the Government's efforts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) said, do not get in the way of job creation—the drive, entrepreneurial spirit and enthusiasm that smaller business men and women need to create jobs.

[Mr. Ian Taylor]

It is an onerous responsibility employing someone. It is an even greater responsibility for someone to try to ensure that he gets cash flow, so that he can pay all the bills regularly. I have advised small companies, and sometimes we get lofty in our debates in the House about the day-to-day practical challenges that business men and women face, so it is essential that we do not try to make their life more difficult.

It is also important, however, that Government understand that their responsibility is to contribute to changes in culture which can—and, in an increasingly competitive world, must—impact on those businesses. One of the sad things I found as Minister was the lack of understanding in the whole innovation process of the work of design.

I too pay tribute to the Design Council. It kindly sent me some figures, which I am sure it sent to other Members, which show the impact of design. I am convinced that that impact is genuine at each stage of the process, not just in the final packaging of a product. The aim is to make the product attractive to the customer, useful to him and with an added value that may demarcate it from a product made by a rival company or by a company abroad.

According to research by the London business school, devoting an additional 1 per cent. of turnover to product development and design raises both turnover and profits by 3 to 4 per cent. over five years. Other people may come up with different figures. The point is that there is a bottom-line advantage in investing in good design and in innovation.

Innovation is a difficult concept to understand, but, as the Minister said, it means making better productive use of new ideas—and of old ones in a new context—and it is crucial for British business to innovate. If there is a generalised criticism of small businesses in this country, it is that their failure to innovate will probably mean that many will fail unnecessarily, to put it bluntly.

Large or medium companies at the forefront of competition increasingly speak about the need to transform their product range every three years. That means that the products that they will make profits from in three, four or five years' time are probably only now being thought through or developed. That is a challenge for smaller businesses. The Design Council's figures, which are more up to date than any that I have, show that "just 3% of UK companies have produced a new product in the last five years. In contrast, of the top-performing 25% of companies, 15% had produced a new product in the past five years, and for the top 10%, the figure is 62%".

I hope that small businesses realise the extent of the challenge that that represents for them, and that they must rise to it if they are to develop the new products that will be needed. They should understand the transforming way in which technology is impacting on business, and keep up with the opportunities that technological developments can bring, not only in manufacturing, but in the adaptation of products.

I welcome the Design Council's millennium products initiative. It was right and proper to have a showcase for new products developed by British industry. I draw attention to an initiative which I believe the Minister did not mention this morning but for which I have always been an enthusiast. I refer to the SMART and SPUR initiative—the small firms merit award for science, and support for products under research.

Especially at the SMART award level, the initiative targets companies employing fewer than 50 people, giving them the incentive to work on new ideas and new products. A Government grant can be a godsend to a company that has had no extra funding other than bank borrowing secured on private assets.

There is much talk, and has been much lobbying, about the role of inventors. Trevor Baylis has been very successful with the clockwork radio and is, naturally and rightly, anxious to help other inventors. The difficulty often is that inventors believe that they have the world's greatest ever product, and do not want to share the intellectual property or collaborate. It is a constant effort to encourage them to collaborate.

Sometimes businesses can be sponsors of the development of products. One or two challenge awards are designed to encourage inventors to work with larger companies, so that a good idea passes through what is often one of the most difficult stages—the engineering process to make a good idea into a commercially viable product.

The Year of Engineering Success is another initiative that has continued through the change in Governments. It is designed to raise the status of engineers and engineering in each aspect of our lives, of which it is a crucial part. Engineers are no longer underpaid and not valued by companies. Figures that I recently read show that, of recent graduates entering employment, engineers have a higher average starting salary than many other categories of graduate taken on by companies. Engineers should be regarded as much more central to our future.

We have played around with figures on the science base this morning. The science base in this country is excellent by any standard of measurement. I know that partly because of the way in which Science Ministers or the presidential adviser on science to President Clinton in the United States—the Americans do not have a Science Minister—regularly asked how we managed to do so well in the international league tables from our science base. We have a very high level of output, and our scientists are renowned throughout the world.

The difficulty with our science base is the need to realise that only the best science is worth funding. In the past few years, research councils have communicated the message that we must ensure that we back the alpha plus projects.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the worrying things about the science base is the way in which the capital foundation, the equipment and the infrastructure of research in universities have been eroded in the past several years? That issue is causing anxiety not only in universities, but in the large part of our industry that depends on research and development. That is one of the issues that has sprung from the Dearing report, which has highlighted it, and highlighted the need for large sums of money to stay where we are, not only now but in future, so that we can keep pace with the rate at which equipment is developing?

Mr. Taylor: I accept some of that criticism. In universities, there are problems with the standard of some

equipment—something that emerged in the PREST report about two years ago. That report showed that we should be profoundly worried about some aspects, although in others we were obviously doing extremely well.

The challenge for universities is to find out how to collaborate, among themselves as well as with industry, so that the best equipment will be available in the excellent research laboratories that we shall require. The challenge is also a factor of money. Some equipment that is required for the top-class research, as I said in an earlier intervention, is becoming extremely pricey, and will go out of date fairly rapidly.

All those matters can be part of a cross-party debate if one wishes. It is much more complicated to get to the root of the problem, and I believe that the Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry and the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry will wrestle with the problems that I wrestled with—how one persuades universities to understand how to make the best use of their equipment.

I will not name names, but some universities have not done especially well in that regard. A great deal of equipment seems not to be especially highly utilised. Others have done brilliantly. Birmingham university's completely refurbished chemistry department is a joy to behold. It can be done.

Dr. Gibson: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the need to fund alpha-rated projects. I shall not trivialise the issue, or he will accuse me of doing so later. What percentages of alpha-rated projects were funded between the years 1992 and 1996? Did the percentage go up or down? I say that it went down under your tutelage.

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt. I am sorry to rise to my feet again, but the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) again used the wrong terminology in the House. Will he please try to remember?

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is far too shrewd and well informed to think that I have the figures at the back of my mind or to ask the question in that way, because in recent years the quantity of applications has increased so that it is likely that the percentage of grants given will have decreased. That is a matter that he can ponder later.

There is bound to be pressure on research councils such as the Medical Research Council. The quality of research in this country is buoyant—it is very good. The applications coming through are remarkable. It will always be a challenge for any budget that is constrained to meet all the desires of all the scientists in this country.

Labour Members mentioned inward investment. Much of the inward investment has brought with it a science relationship. One reason that Siemens came into the north-east with an investment of more than £1 billion was the quality of the five universities in that region. Siemens has invested in close relationships with the universities, and was attracted by their academic excellence and the openness of our university system, compared with the very closed and rigid nature of the German system.

There are many other examples. Motorola has worked with universities in Scotland. Look at how Sharp has functioned in Oxford and at how some of the biotechnology companies have invested in the United Kingdom. They have continually boosted the science base.

Much of that is blue-sky rather than close-to-market research, but I have never put down close-to-market research. In many cases, universities need to show industry that they are capable of understanding some of the more practical problems faced by industry, if industry is to have confidence in investing in universities' blue-sky research. Thus there is cross-fertilisation between industry and universities.

However, one should not have the impression that the United Kingdom is the poor man in Europe in terms of research because it is the absolute opposite. Some £46 billion of inward investment comes from other partners in the European Union alone, and much of it is closely related to research. For example, in Southampton, Pirelli is doing wonderful work in optical fibres. I do not have time to continue my list of examples but I hope that I have given a flavour of what is happening in that respect.

Technology is vital, and using information technology will be crucial in the future. Many changes will occur over the next few years. Indeed, some people say that the power of computers doubles every year in terms of the capacity of the chip. It is difficult to forecast; real-terms prices are certainly still declining dramatically, which means that over the next few years, the power of a computer at a given price will increase dramatically.

We are seeing a transformation in telecommunications in their broadest sense, allowing businesses to communicate with each other but also empowering smaller businesses to do things which previously only big businesses could do. I refer not just to electronic commerce but to access to information and the ability to analyse information, distribute it and profit from it within the business process—collaborative work that can now be done on line.

All those matters were at the heart of the programme for business initiative that we launched, which was designed to show that small businesses must understand that, if their competitive advantage is to be preserved, they must make full use of those information technology opportunities, or other companies will crowd into their market and reduce their competitive presence.

Having been positive, I want to end on two negative notes. One of Parliament's jobs is to issue warnings when they are required. Two information technology problems are about to run side by side as, sadly, many of the same information technology skills must be used among a limited number of people in the industry. The first problem is the euro, and the second is the year 2000.

On the first problem, a great fallacy into which politicians often fall—some businesses certainly fall into it—is that the euro is only for a few multinational companies and that we need not prepare for it. Another fallacy is that, because it will not be legal tender in member countries until after 2001, it is a long way in the future. For many small businesses, the problem starts now.

For example, if a company like Nissan in north-east England decides to use the euro in all its internal operations from 1 January 1999, one must ask what impact that will have on Nissan's hundreds, if not thousands, of suppliers. Siemens will do the same. I have already mentioned the amount of inward investment from

[Mr. Taylor]

the European Union into this country. More than 200,000 people in this country work directly for inward investors from the rest of the European Union; the normal ratio of those employed in work closely related to that investment is five to eight times that figure. We then have British companies: I understand that Bass Charrington and Marks and Spencer will use the euro in all their internal operations.

Regardless of whether hon. Members like the prospect of the euro—I shall not get into that debate now—I simply say that British industry must prepare for it. If it does not, it will have a profound competitive disadvantage. If the euro is used in all the supply chains and in its Treasury functions, and is the dominating currency used by companies based in this country, small companies will have to adapt. If they wake up to that fact next year, they will start to panic. A second reason why they may have to panic next year is that Cap Gemini, a computer consultant, reckons that up to 29 per cent. of British gross national product could be at risk because of the 2000 computer problem—the fact that computers will fail to recognise the 1999-2000 date change. That may be a gross exaggeration, but Midland bank reckons that one in five small companies will fail as a result of that computer collapse.

British companies will panic next year. The danger is that they believe that the problem need not be resolved until 31 December 1999; yet next year they will suddenly realise that companies with which they have traditionally dealt will no longer be prepared to deal with them if they are incapable of complying with the 2000 problem well before the deadline. BT and some of the banks are already doing that. Indeed, the Government are already doing it. I hope that the Minister knows that the Government, in their technology platform contracts, already say that unless a company can be compliant with the 2000 problem, it cannot tender for technology framework contracts.

Mrs. May: Does my hon. Friend agree that another serious problem faced by companies is the combination of having potentially to prepare for the introduction of the euro on 1 January 1999, as my hon. Friend outlined, and the 2000 problem, which means that they face the problem of an insufficient number of people with the IT skills to prepare the system necessary for those two events? Does my hon. Friend agree that the industry and the financial sector are seriously concerned about that problem?

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and puts her finger on the problem. I was speaking about that problem at a conference yesterday. It is a grave concern. My hon. Friends may wish to know that the best reason for the United Kingdom not joining the euro on 1 January 1999 is the information technology reason. The best reason for us not being in the first wave of the single currency is that British business is simply not prepared for it.

The skills base is required to carry out both the tasks I mentioned: adapting to the euro, and solving the 2000 problem. In reality, the euro will not be delayed simply for that reason, however much it might have been desirable that Chancellor Kohl had as clear an understanding as I have of the 2000 problem.

Thus, my warning to British business is that, although the problems seem insuperable, they must be solved. Businesses may have to start prioritising, which means that some functions within the business may not be able to continue. I repeat that the problem will become critical next year, which is why I say that businesses will panic. They will realise that traditional relationships and supply chains will start to be cut off if they do not solve those problems. They will not be able to correct their systems overnight. It takes careful planning and a lot of painstaking effort, and extends into other areas like embedded chips and even personal computers. Even personal computers sold this year were not 2000-compliant. The problem will get no easier unless companies take a careful view of it.

This matter is far too serious to be party political. However, the Government show no sign of understanding, despite Action 2000, the size of the problem in terms of the British economy. I shall not get into a debate about whether the DTI is taking the right steps; I merely stress the implications for the British economy if we do not get it right. It is not a British problem; there is a global aspect to it, and we need to look at that as well and put pressure on many of the forums around the world.

For the British economy itself, whereas the Minister without Portfolio, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), is planning with excitement the exhibits in the millennium dome and the wonders of the great millennium exhibitions, there may well be in parallel quite a serious hole in the British economy, because of the problems that I have outlined.

Overall, my warning to British small businesses is: prepare for those problems, but, at the same time, look forward and positively at the need to innovate, to use good ideas, to put money into research and development, to co-operate with universities and to collaborate with small and larger companies, if we are to compete properly into the next century.

11.39 am

Ms Jennifer Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this debate. Earlier this week, I was asked—not by an hon. Member, I hasten to say—why I had left it so late to make my maiden speech, and why I had not fitted it into what that person called "one of the big debates". For me, this is one of the big debates, on an issue crucial to the House.

The reason I particularly wanted to make my maiden speech today is partly because of my involvement in small business start-ups in the past, and because we all agree on the importance of the small business sector to our economy.

Most of the businesses in Britain are small firms. They employ half the private sector work force, and the Federation of Small Businesses has calculated that, in the past 15 years, they have created 2 million new jobs.

The growth in the small business sector has also led to self-employment appealing to a much wider section of the population. We have heard how many young people now

see self-employment as an alternative to unemployment or to staying in an unsatisfying job. We must acknowledge the work of organisations such as the Prince's Youth Business Trust in helping many young people to recognise the appeal of self-employment.

The small business sector is diverse in the trades in which it operates and the structures it embraces. It is no longer just sole traders and partnerships; the sector now includes co-operatives, community enterprises and small companies limited by guarantee.

Government policies and initiatives designed to enable industries to develop and compete in world markets need to understand the specific needs of small businesses. Small businesses are not merely a scaled-down version of larger companies: they are separate entities with separate and special needs.

When we discuss innovation, as in this debate, we need to understand how to encourage small businesses to accept innovation and take up the opportunities offered to them, so that they become more competitive.

I have many small businesses in my constituency. Since I was elected, they have repeatedly raised with me the key issues that concern them. The first is late payments, which is brought up time and again. We must find a way of reversing the growing culture of late payments in our economy.

I would prefer that to be done by voluntary codes of conduct, through information leaflets and by raising awareness, but, sadly, that has not worked. As late payments cause havoc to small businesses' cash flow, particularly during the vulnerable first 18 months of trading, we need concrete measures to encourage a climate of prompt payment. For this reason, I welcome the Government's Green Paper on the matter. Innovation will mean nothing to small businesses that go bust because their customers simply will not pay them.

The second issue is the quality of the support and advice services offered to small business. That will be crucial in encouraging innovation in this sector. Business advice is currently delivered through a network of agencies including business links, the Prince's Youth Business Trust, co-operative development agencies and enterprise agencies. Many of those agencies rely on seconded staff, often brought in from larger companies where they have successfully run large departments, or from local and Government service. The agencies often work on the assumption that, having successfully run a department in a large company, the adviser should know everything there is to know about starting up and running a small business.

Not so. The needs of small businesses are entirely different from those of large companies, and business advice services must reflect that. The result is that in Britain we have a variable business advice service. Some business advisers are extremely good. They may well have come from a small business background and be running a small business themselves. However, some are drawn from much larger companies, and simply do not understand what is involved.

I therefore welcome the Government's proposal to set national standards for small business advisers. We must bear in mind the fact that, if the business advice is wrong, the small business—not the business adviser—will bear the brunt.

I also welcome the proposals which I understand are to be made to ensure that the boards and management committees of business links and other business advice agencies have a strong small business representation. It is crucial that the special needs of small businesses are listened to, understood and met.

The third issue is support services, which will be crucial to encourage small businesses to embrace innovation. Small businesses need a far greater take-up of information technology. We have already heard the figures. Small companies use information technology to a much smaller extent than larger companies, but they must adapt to it in order to compete worldwide. I fully endorse the policies to encourage IT into small businesses, but I am concerned about the way in which support services will be offered to the businesses so that they can take up innovation.

A great deal of training will be required. It must be understood that small businesses do not have the resources or the time to release staff to go on training courses. The training will have to be taken into the companies. Many small businesses turn down opportunities, not because they are not interested or do not realise its importance, but because they cannot release staff to go out of the companies.

I shall give a couple of examples from my town, Wolverhampton, where the university, through the STEP scheme—the special temporary employment programme—places IT students in companies, using chamber of commerce sponsorship, so that the students can work inside the small businesses, examining their IT needs and helping from inside the firm. No staff have to be released.

The university has a newly established science park and has set up what it calls the broadnet—websites for small businesses on the internet. From their premises, those businesses can tap into business information and support services.

I take this opportunity to sing the praises of Wolverhampton university. It is a modern university, dedicated to working with businesses. It has developed the science park, and is using new technology and taking it into companies.

The fourth issue is red tape. There is no doubt that small businesses consider themselves overburdened with the regulatory paperwork they must deal with. I appeal to the Minister to streamline the paperwork that businesses must cope with. As was said, businesses will find it extremely difficult to accept innovation if they are tied up in red tape. That will be a turn-off.

My constituency and the town in which it is situated has a long history of trade and industry. Wolverhampton was founded by a woman more than 1,000 years ago. Lady Wulfruna was a Saxon noblewoman who received a charter from the king at the time, Ethelred, to set up a settlement on the high land. The settlement became known as Wulfruna's Heantun, which became the modern town of Wolverhampton. A Saxon cross stands in the grounds of St. Peter's church, which also had its land granted by Wulfruna, and which testifies to the town's ancient beginnings. Over the centuries, several of the town's institutions continued to be named after Wulfruna, including Wulfrun college, the successful further education college in my constituency.

[Ms Jennifer Jones]

The entrepreneurial spirit of the early Wulfrunians soon became apparent, and a market was established in the 10th century. Unfortunately, they neglected to get a licence from the king, who took great exception, and fined them before granting them a licence. Wolverhampton soon established itself as a wool trading centre, and in the 14th and 15th centuries it was regarded as one of the staple towns of the wool trade. To this day, that is reflected in the town's coat of arms.

Wolverhampton's prosperity and energy was captured by Turner in 1795, when he painted the town's market. The painting was part of the artist's early work, before what is known as his mushy period. There is a new book in the Library on Turner, but unfortunately it does not include that painting. If anyone wishes to see a print of it, however, there is one in my office in the House.

Hon. Members may not be aware of Wolverhampton's connection with the gunpowder plot. Some of Guy Fawkes's co-conspirators took refuge near the town, and those who gave them shelter were captured and brought to trial in Wolverhampton. They were publicly executed in the town's main square, which is now a pedestrian precinct.

The arrival of the industrial revolution was fully embraced by Wolverhampton, which swapped trade for industry. The wealth of the town continued and grew, and those seeking to make their fortunes were attracted to the area.

Over the centuries, Wolverhampton has welcomed people from many walks of life who are willing to work hard and contribute to the town's prosperity. My constituency's multicultural population is reflected in its wide variety of eating houses and places of worship. The multicultural aspect of my constituency is a strength, not a weakness. From time to time, some have attempted to portray that aspect in a negative light—it happened again during the recent general election campaign, but the people of Wolverhampton, South-West decided that their health service, their schools and their jobs were more important than the colour of their neighbour's skin, and for that reason the victory on 1 May was sweeter than many others that night.

Wolverhampton's economy suffered badly in the 1980s as the manufacturing sector collapsed, but partnership among the council, the chamber of commerce, the university and local businesses has revived the town's fortunes, and it is now an attractive place to do business. Wolverhampton suffers from a poor national image which is quite undeserved, and visitors to my constituency invariably say that it is much nicer than they had expected.

On a visit to Canada this summer, while browsing through a bookshop I picked up some travel books on the United Kingdom, and was interested to read that Canadians certainly consider Wolverhampton worth a visit.

Clearly, people who have no preconceptions about my constituency find it an interesting and attractive place. Its art gallery is rated as one of the best provincial galleries in the United Kingdom. One of the finest collections of William Morris furnishings and pre-Raphaelite paintings can be found at Wightwick manor, a National Trust property on the edge of my constituency. Bantock House museum has a magnificent collection of Bilston enamels. My constituency also offers a newly refurbished racecourse and the town has many nightclubs.

Last, but by no means least, Wolverhampton Wanderers football club is one of the oldest and most distinguished clubs in the country. Last year, the club unveiled a statue to commemorate one of the all-time soccer greats who used to play for Wolves—Billy Wright. I am, of course, a devoted fan of Wolverhampton Wanderers, not just because the stadium is in my constituency but because some of my husband's relatives used to play for the club, and distinguished themselves in doing so.

Being a Wolves fan can be a somewhat invigorating experience. The club has certainly had its ups and downs in the past, but it is currently going through an up, preferably into the premier league next season.

Finally, I turn to my predecessor. It is customary for a new Member in a maiden speech to talk about his or her predecessor. As the House knows, mine was Nicholas Budgen, who represented Wolverhampton, South-West for 23 years. I feel that I can say without fear of contradiction that Mr. Budgen was a high-profile Member. He voiced his opinions strongly on issues that he considered important. It is not for me to pass judgment on his service as an hon. Member; I shall leave that to his contemporaries and to history. However, my family and I knew Nick Budgen for many years, and during the election campaign he and I attended several public meetings together.

The campaign in Wolverhampton, South-West was robust and energetic, leading the local papers to describe the pair of us as "The Nick and Jenny show—the only show in town worth watching". We both found that rather amusing.

Nick Budgen enjoyed being controversial, and thought nothing of taking on a room full of people in vigorous debate. On several occasions, he reminded me of a child stirring an anthill with a stick just to see what the reaction would be. His wry sense of humour was used to very good effect, although it was often aimed at his own party. He was always polite to me; he never got personal, and he always stuck to the issues.

Several days after the election, Nick Budgen telephoned me to wish me good luck in my new job. I now wish him good luck, as I gather that he has decided to return to the law. My biggest debt of gratitude to him is for his considerable contribution to the success of my campaign, in that, he enabled me to become the first Labour Member for Wolverhampton, South-West.

11.56 am

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on her knowledgeable contribution to this morning's debate. She spoke clearly and raised a number of serious issues, such as late payment and business support.

I whole-heartedly welcome the opportunity today to debate innovation and the role of small firms. As the Liberal Democrat spokesman on small businesses and as a small business man of some years' standing, I have become increasingly frustrated at the often unnecessary pressures that small and medium-sized enterprises face, particularly when those pressures seriously impinge on a company's desire for growth and expansion.

I was glad to hear the Minister refer to a long-term approach. Coming from a background of manufacturing, I also welcomed her commitment in July, when she said:

"I want to see British innovators and entrepreneurs starting new businesses, particularly in high technology and manufacturing sectors."

I shall be watching that space closely.

It has long been a concern of mine that manufacturing has declined. Many promote the cause of financial institutions, but what is money for if not for purchasing? A great amount of purchasing is of manufactured goods.

In almost every issue that I encounter as a politician, whether it be crime, education or charity shops, to name but a few, small businesses are affected in one way or another. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, the integral importance of small businesses to our economy and the country as a whole often goes largely unrecognised—although, all of a sudden, quite a few hon. Members seemed to pop up at Prime Minister's Question Time this week, with contributions that were not all as constructive as they could have been. In the past, there has been a great concentration on big businesses and I hope that, with the new Government, we shall see a change. I certainly hope that that will extend to the media as well.

The Minister referred earlier to the fact that in this country we have not been very strong in converting new ideas and inventions into commercial success. The severe problem has been a lack of willingness on behalf of financial institutions to lend money for new ideas. Perhaps the Minister can do something to encourage more imagination among lenders. Too often, our inventions have gone abroad. Are financial institutions geared up to recognising initiative, or are they more interested in passing money from hand to hand?

In an age of unlimited communication, the customer and community are wiser than ever. Demands and priorities shift radically and subtly, and business must be able to respond. The key difference between small and large firms is their role in innovation. Small businesses often have a niche in the development of innovation because they provide a product or service that is slightly different from that provided by larger firms. That success is unarguable, as small businesses have a larger share of major innovations than their share of employment.

Innovation plays a vital role in a company's competitiveness. Profitability will slowly decrease if a company's sole objective is to keep costs down without paying attention to innovation and innovative processes. Customers will therefore be attracted to new products or services that other competitors offer. That is why this debate is so important. As with dinosaurs, so with companies: it is survival of the fittest rather than the biggest that will determine the economic winners.

As the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) said in his constructive speech, design is vital. We all receive information on that. I agree with him and reiterate the point that an extra 1 per cent. of turnover can lead to an increase in profits of between 3 per cent. and 4 per cent. I very much welcome his contribution about engineers. Many people are concerned that engineers should have their profile raised and be much more readily accepted. I support his concern, too, about the euro and the preparedness for that. Such a large issue merits a speech on its own.

Funding problems, cash flow and available staff mean that a small firm is less likely to be heavily involved in the research process, but creativity must not be wasted. Fledgling enterprises must receive the support of a sympathetic capital framework. For Britain to remain competitive in the long term, we need active government and constructive support for enterprise and initiative that will allow British companies to compete. Most important, we must invest in skills and education. That is why the Liberal Democrats are fully committed to improving education, from nursery level to higher education. We are, as we have said, committed to that principle to the extent that we are prepared to fund it by a penny-in-the-pound income tax policy.

If we provide the young with access to understanding the role and significance of skills and training, the economic benefits will be realisable in the long run. A one-off introduction of skills and training will not suffice. The Government must provide opportunities for retraining and the updating of skills, to avoid falling foul of the fact that rapid obsolescence of skills is a principal characteristic of today's economy.

Furthermore, it is vital that we end the nonsensical competition between educational and industrial sectors for project funding and establish instead a collaborative approach to research and development. Links between industry and academics will ensure that the laboratory breakthroughs of today feed more quickly into the production line innovations of tomorrow.

I should like to take this opportunity to detail some problems that prevent small and medium-sized enterprises from taking more innovative steps. Cash flow is important to enable firms to plan for growth and product development. Two principal factors seriously hinder companies' innovative abilities. The first is business rates. The uniform business rate is indiscriminate and set without reference to the local economy. The UBR has seen strategic growth objectives replaced by a rolling, short-term agenda, which has played havoc with regional and local markets.

In August 1997, a Forum of Private Business survey found that 52.3 per cent. of businesses believed that the UBR was their principal and most frequent concern. The Liberal Democrats are committed to addressing that concern by abolishing the UBR and replacing it with a local site value rating, which would be set and raised by the local authority. That would permit the local authority to respond sensitively and, indeed, sensibly, to the business community and to account more fully for the impact of planning decisions and complex developments on the local economy.

The second factor is late payment of debt, which also cripples small firms. That is why the Liberal Democrats welcome the forthcoming legislation on the statutory right to interest on late payment. That legislation and the reform of the business rates would free up cash flow for small firms. However, much more could be done to improve the situation.

As I have already said, initiative and innovation can be found in small firms. Unfortunately, too many promising business plans, with exciting implications for local and regional markets, fail to make it off the drawing board because of a lack of starting capital. We therefore propose a series of radical measures to ensure that such creativity is not wasted. The Liberal Democrats support the

[Mr. Brian Cotter]

establishment of regional development agencies, which has also been proposed by the Government. We have been hammering away at that idea for years, so we welcome the Government on board. However, we shall examine the final proposals carefully for, in particular, democratic accountability. If the RDAs are to succeed, they must relate to the local community, which is the basis for the whole idea. To ensure effective small business support, the RDAs must have proper access to finance that they can use to support innovation. I urge the Minister to consider that idea carefully.

All those proposals assume that, at every stage, businesses receive the support and advice that they need to develop, innovate and prosper. For a long time, a plethora of business support groups has existed, but unfortunately duplication of work often occurs. The problem requires examination to maximise efficiency—for example, one-stop shops should be encouraged. Too much money has gone to waste. Many firms, both new and established, have never heard of their local business link. Why not? For example, the overall winner of the small business of the year competition said to me recently, when I asked her that very question, that she had not heard of business links or training and enterprise councils. Her business succeeded, but not everybody can do it alone.

It is ludicrous that most business links do not even have rolling programmes or contacts with the high street banks. I spoke recently to a group of some 20 to 30 start-up companies, which were sponsored by a bank. They had been going for some 18 months and a good half had not heard of business links. That is a worrying statistic.

Business links are also notoriously inconsistent. Some are good and some are very bad. For example, the network should be used to encourage innovation in computerisation. However, my experience with my company has been mixed. On one occasion, I asked for help with computerisation from a local counsellor at the local business link, but he did not have any suggestions to make. Yet a few weeks later I approached a computer company and was told that there was financial support through business links, and if I approached a certain gentleman there, he would give me more details. That is rather worrying.

Many business links are not overly concerned with struggling businesses, preferring to concentrate their money and their support on small firms that are already achieving, and therefore do not require so much assistance. That practice ignores the fact that many of the smallest firms are among the fastest growing, and have great innovative potential.

The Minister recently said that the intention was to extend business links down to the lowest level, and I hope that that will happen in practice. I shall be watching developments closely.

The one-stop shop should provide opportunities for business innovation. Such a body would recognise the fact that small and medium-sized enterprises face considerable difficulty in raising capital for investment, especially in securing resources to maintain their existing markets.

In addition to the measures that I have already mentioned, the following factors would ensure that SMEs could be helped to maintain their competitive edge. The Government should work with the banks and the private sector to develop new sources of private finance. Liberal Democrats would encourage the development of grants, equity finance and mutual guarantee schemes.

The adoption of mutual guarantee schemes, in particular, would be an effective support for business initiatives. Such a scheme operates as a sort of co-operative. Firms collaborate to set up a society and establish a pool of money to be available for lending within the membership at a reduced rate of interest, without a requirement for punitive and difficult-to-achieve collateral.

In France, Belgium and Germany, 20 to 30 per cent. of borrowing takes place through similar schemes, with consequent lower interest rates and stronger SME sectors. I hope that the Government will pay attention to that approach and promote it throughout the country, especially through business links.

Mrs. Gillan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be disastrous if the budget for business links were reduced next year? The Minister has already confirmed that this year it will remain the same as it was under the previous Government, but the budget for successive years is under review. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in expressing concern about the possibility of that budget being reduced?

Mr. Cotter: I agree with you about any reduction in the effectiveness of business links. However, I think the idea is that business links are supposed increasingly to become free-standing and to finance themselves, so the scheme will progress in that direction. I would join you if the Minister, unless she says otherwise—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Cotter *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must take his seat when I am on my feet. I believe that he was agreeing not with me but with the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who intervened in his speech.

Mr. Cotter: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mrs. Roche *rose—*

Mr. Cotter: May I give way to the Minister, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mrs. Roche: May I deal with a misunderstanding on the part not of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) but of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan)? There is no separate spending review for business links—although, of course, every Government programme in every Department is subject to our overall comprehensive spending review. I am sure that the hon. Lady knows that full well, but I thought that I had better pick her up on that little point.

Mrs. Gillan: It is not a point at all.

Mr. Cotter: What we look for within the business links system is advice, and I shall touch briefly on some

important details. Many small firms are not well aware of how to produce their own management accounts. That is the sort of system that I would hope business links could promote among small companies.

Perhaps one way of helping companies in a financial direction would be a "lend an accountant" scheme. Trainee accountants, in their last month or so, could go out into industry, especially to small companies—not, perhaps, to learn from a company so much as to give it some idea of how it should operate as a small company. Another important factor to which the Minister referred is mentoring, which is vital in terms of business links. A rigorous code of banking practice should be drawn up and the powers of the banking ombudsman reviewed with a view to extending them, to guarantee that banks provide a better SME service.

One further interpretation of innovation is the process of improving business management, which I maintain means more than cuts, downsizing and the bottom line. The challenge is to manage constructively. The management consultants who reported on my small business commented that I had in my business plan a commitment to create jobs and to keep people in work. Why not? It is sometimes easy to sack employees, but it is more difficult to keep people in work. It is easy to create a downward spiral.

I am a member of the Deregulation Committee, which gives me a role, I hope, in bringing innovation to business practice. We need to bring an innovatory approach to how we run and regulate our businesses. I know that the Forum of Private Business has some ideas on reducing the burden of red tape on health and safety. There is a great tendency with the bureaucracy of regulation for it to grow rather like creeping ivy, to slowly strangle business. Regulation often seems to feed off itself; for example, in the past, catering organisations have been required to clean their ceilings twice a day. Frequently, that is not required—it is regulation gone mad, and I hope that the Minister looks at that matter. I am all for health and safety in the workplace, but regulation can be a barrier to innovation, and we should examine the proliferation of rules for the sake of rules.

The ideas that I have put forward today only begin to touch on an important issue. We are at a crossroads—as we have often been in this country—but now more than ever, we must take the right road to high-quality education and training. We must be innovative in our ideas when it comes to business support, so that small businesses can be given a chance to be truly innovative themselves.

12.18 pm

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on her maiden speech. I found her account of the origins of Wolverhampton both interesting and informative. I had thought that Wolverhampton had something to do wolves—either the sort that whistle or the sort with four legs. I now know that I was wrong. I welcome my hon. Friend's insight into, and experience of, small businesses, which will be a great advantage to the Labour party in fulfilling its election commitment to small businesses.

The term "research and development" is often quoted as a founding contribution to innovation, but without too much differentiation between what are two quite distinct activities. Research is a process of finding out new knowledge that becomes the raw material and provides the ingredients of development. Development means taking new or existing knowledge and applying it to solve a problem or to create something that people will buy. Innovation involves making a new product that is commercially successful.

We in Britain often congratulate ourselves on the excellence of our research. That is justified: the number of Nobel prizes that we win is out of all proportion to our population, and British research papers are respected worldwide. That is a mark of our ability to produce original work and ideas which may then become the raw material for commercial development anywhere in the world.

As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor), there is substantial anxiety about the recent erosion of our basic research. The foresight exercise certainly enables us to identify ways in which science may be boosted, and more work needs to be done, but anxiety remains about the future of the foundation of our scientific knowledge.

The phrase, "invented in Britain, commercialised in the United States" is legendary and should also cause us anxiety. Britain excels in research but has an extremely mixed record in development. Japan, with a much poorer record in original research, excels in development. The United States has an excellent record in research and development and in commercialising the results.

A debate on innovation and small businesses must explore why we are so much weaker at development and commercialisation than at research. The problem cannot be remedied by trying to turn our universities into development institutions; that is not their role, which is to widen and develop the fund of scientific knowledge that is available for subsequent application.

Development depends on knowledge of markets, which universities do not have, and which it is not their role to have. Development is undoubtedly the role of industry and other commercially oriented organisations.

Industry does not need universities to be a cheap source of development effort. That would only deflect them from their principal roles not only of expanding the fund of scientific knowledge but of giving people research and development skills for application elsewhere.

Britain's weakness in innovation lies at the junction between technical and scientific knowledge and market understanding. Some members of the scientific community have displayed a supercilious attitude towards development, suggesting that it is an intellectually inferior activity and that only pure science should be promoted. I hope that that attitude is disappearing; if it is not, I hope that we can do whatever is necessary to disabuse those who maintain it.

Bringing the technical and market sides together does not mean simply getting people who work in marketing in industry to talk to people who work in technical roles in industry. The tendency is for the people who work in marketing to regard the long term as anything more than six months hence, whereas those in research and development consider it hardly possible to achieve anything substantial in less than 18 months or two years. If we are not careful, the whole process turns into a dialogue of the deaf.

[Mr. Nigel Beard]

Where there is accommodation, the end product will often be the incremental change of existing products or processes or a minor adaptation to new markets. I do not want to belittle that. The progressive and gradual adaptation of any business and product is essential.

In talking about innovation, however, we are talking about substantial changes that widen profit margins and enable a company to take more than a transitory lead over competitors. That implies development programmes that anticipate demands three, four or five years hence. It implies an intimate understanding of what would be the advantages that would bring value to customers. The missing ingredient in many development programmes in Britain seems to be that sensitive awareness of what customers will need in the medium and long term—three to five years hence.

Circumstances in different companies will define how best to plug that gap in market knowledge. In some, the research and development activity may well need to be integrated much more fully with business planning and management. Certainly in some companies research and development activity is treated like a firm of plumbers called in an emergency to deal with a leak: they are not part of the weft and warp of that business's activity. All the evidence shows that, where that is the case, companies do not get the best value from their research and development. In other companies, more deliberate attention needs to be paid to finding out what the markets require and what customers will find valuable.

Where the issue is high technology and two technologies have to be developed and harmonised, there is no substitute for companies jointly working on that development so that one side knows clearly what the other will want. There is no other way to gain that knowledge in the detail that high technology development now requires.

That work is essentially internal to any organisation, but beyond that is the phase of development that we could call development in the marketplace. After all the analysis and technical ingenuity of development, there is a need to check with customers the acceptability of an innovation before any large-scale investment in launching and manufacturing it is made.

Japan is very good at that. Most of the products exported here have been tried out on the Japanese market for several years, and many others never see the light of day in international trade for just that sort of reason. That period of trial, error and adjustment is one reason why the Japanese are so good at development. If it is missed out, there is undoubtedly a danger of major investment being wasted and the company's future innovative activity being discredited among those who think it is best to "stick to their knitting".

That is most particularly a danger in large and more mature companies with major products that are already established. In the management of such companies, there is an impatience with the inevitably small volumes and returns of the early days of a development and a tendency to insist that demand increases more quickly, that everything should be born adolescent, and an impatience with childhood. It does not work. That is the mechanism by which many mature companies kill off potentially successful innovations.

For all those reasons, a strong school of thought with good reason behind it believes that the latter stages of development and the early stages of commercialisation are best carried out in some model of a small company, even if it is within a larger one.

Small companies have the flexibility, speed of decision and informality that best suits innovation. Their problem is raising money for what is inevitably a risky business. Funding innovation is more akin to insurance than to banking. The investor will be rewarded if one out of 10 projects succeed—the insurance basis—rather than taking 10 per cent. from all 10 succeeding. Venture capital organisations tend to understand that. On the whole, banks do not.

Small established companies have particular problems in renewing themselves. Innovation does not depend only on new research—it may be things done a few years ago that apply—but it does involve a small company having someone there to absorb the technology from where it originates. Many small and medium-sized companies do not have that capability, although many have a close understanding of the market and their customers.

In Germany, the problem has been addressed through state-sponsored organisations, such as the Fraunhofer institutes mentioned earlier, that undertake development programmes under contract for small companies. The people involved are often recruited into the small companies, and so the organisations also act as a staging post between academia and the industrial small company. Perhaps similar organisations could be established in Britain associated with our regional universities without detracting from their principal role. It may be appropriate to consider using some of the defence research organisations, which are becoming redundant, for the same role.

I wish to touch on the attempts of the Government and European Union to stimulate innovation through grant systems. Too often, the tendency has been to make them conditional on projects that are distant from the market. That has meant that we have stimulated research projects that have added to the fund of knowledge that goes unused.

The real problem for industry in dealing with innovation is that budgets rise rapidly during the development process without risks being diminished. That is why industry tends to baulk at continuing some of the riskier projects. If we are to encourage innovation, both British and EU schemes for encouraging it by grants need to address that problem and provide the aid much nearer to market, and not be too squeamish about its being near to market.

I commend to my hon. Friend the Minister the consideration of some form of aid for launching products into the early stages of commercialisation, which is an expensive and risky business and, very often, the inhibition on innovation.

12.33 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on her practical, down-to-earth contribution. One of the things that women bring to the House is a good dose of common sense. While our male colleagues, with the best will in the world, often waffle on about the niceties of a matter, she brought it down to the facts, because of her background as a business adviser and training manager.

I was interested to hear the hon. Lady say that the problem that small firms have with schemes such as business links, mentioned by the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter), is that they do not have the time, staff or ability to let people go off on all these wonderful courses. Nor do they have time to fill in the endless forms to take advantage of the wonderful grants that are available through the Government, and perhaps the European Community.

The Minister has pledged that she intends to isolate and tackle the factors that stifle growth. I hope that, when she does so, the hon. Lady is on her team, because she has a lot of practical common sense to offer. She told us about the problems faced by the innovative wool merchants of mediaeval Wolverhampton, who had to counter attempts by the king to get in on the act and spoil their efforts to establish the wool industry. She knows perfectly well that similar problems are faced by companies now from the local council's planning man or environmental man, who will not agree to a change of business use for premises wanted by business men. Those are the practical problems that we should talk about in a debate on innovation.

The debate has been stimulated by the Government's response to a report published in another place entitled "The Innovation-Exploitation Barrier". The barriers to exploitation and innovation are largely Government-made. They are the regulatory structures that stop newcomers and entrepreneurs from getting their good ideas off the ground. On the very first page, the report points out that one of the greatest problems is the availability of finance. Many people have a good idea, and translating it into a practical new business is a major problem in itself, let alone obtaining the means to finance it.

Most small business men initially go to their banks, and they often pawn their homes to get the necessary funding. Every time the Government put up interest rates, that creates additional problems for them. After just six months in office, the Government have put them up no fewer than five times.

That means that the business man has to find more money to meet his monthly repayment loans. That is a serious problem. It is all very well for the Governor of the Bank of England and his monetary committee to sit there working out international market movements in currencies, but it boils down to the practical problem of finding the extra money out of meagre profits to meet the loan repayments.

We saw some mega-mistakes in financial wranglings because of the ghastly exchange rate mechanism experiment. Because of that, small firms that had hocked their businesses and their homes to extend their commercial activities went down the pan. That was a dreadful example to us of the way in which such currency interventions can operate, and I am afraid that it was my Government who pursued that policy towards integration with Europe.

I beg the Minister to bring those examples to the attention of her Government colleagues who wish to pursue the idea of joining a single European currency. The problems we encountered will recur, and perhaps no one will suffer more than small businesses and the people employed by them.

I would not quarrel with the idea that the universities produce a great many of our innovative ideas, but we must also remember that many people learn their trade on the job, particularly those who do not do well at school or do not go to university. Let me mention a couple of outstanding examples.

I believe that Alan Sugar is touring the country on behalf of the Government trying to get children at school interested in the idea of business. I hope that he also points out the problems he had when he started on a market stall. He had to go to Korea to get his low-cost computers made. That may have had something to do with funding and the difficulties created by Governments when it comes to employing people. He may have had problems with his local council when it came to setting up his factory. Perhaps the health and safety officer was set to create so many problems for him that he could not produce his product at a price at which he could sell it.

Dyson is another man who had a great idea. He is an engineer who learned his trade as a workman, but he could not get funding here, and had to go to Japan to get his project off the ground. In fact, I understand that the big companies wanted to buy up his idea for a new vacuum cleaner just so that they could shelve it.

All those barriers are practical problems. If the Government want to innovate to get rid of those problems, they should start by considering the system in Italy. There, small firms employing fewer than 20 people, or fewer than five in agriculture, are exempt from most of the petty regulations applying to employment and from social service regulations; as a result, the additional costs of employing people are lower.

In this country, those additional costs are running at 18 per cent. of salary; in Germany, the figure is about 45 per cent., which is why we would be mad to take on the responsibilities implicit in the social chapter. Doing so would make us uneconomic and undermine and begin to destroy our industry—which is doing extremely well thanks to the work of the previous Government.

The first innovation I would recommend to the Government, therefore, is to send someone to Italy to find out about that country's marvellous scheme. The vast majority of large companies—even companies such as Fiat and Benetton Group—make most of their products not in vast factories, but in little back-street workshops and in family businesses that can get on with the job without Government regulations and inspectors breathing down their necks.

Dr. Palmer: Although I respect the hon. Lady's enthusiasm for European ideas, does she really think it wise to introduce artificial distinctions between larger companies, which would be required to treat their employees well, and smaller companies, which would be free from restrictions? Would not that lead to all sorts of artificial construction, whereby larger companies disguised themselves as conglomerates of smaller companies?

Mrs. Gorman: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, but that situation already exists to some extent. The growth in part-time work in this country has more to do with firms, both large and small, trying to get around the extremely expensive and limiting Government regulations and restrictions on employing people than with the jobs on offer needing only part-time workers.

That change from full-time to part-time jobs will continue if the new Government insist on introducing the minimum wage. That is not because small firms pay

[Mrs. Gorman]

minimal wages—there is no evidence that they do. It is terribly important that younger people are able to get on the job ladder. Young people with few skills have only one way of learning skills to make themselves more employable, and that is by taking a relatively modestly paid job. It is a way of paying for training, just as those who go to university forgo income for several years as a means of paying for their training. The minimum wage will deprive young people of that opportunity.

The Government often mention the United States when talking about the minimum wage. In the United States before 1948, when the minimum wage was introduced, the unemployment rate among unskilled black young people was roughly the same as that among whites. By 1976, black youths in America were half as employable as white youths, and the ratio has worsened since. Because employers are able to discriminate at no cost—they have to pay the same wage, whoever they take on—they tend to take on white employees. The statistics tell us that mucking about with wages and imposing restrictions on employers leads to a reaction.

The information I have cited comes to me via a pamphlet by Walter Williams, a prominent black economist in the United States. He condemns minimum wages outright, because of the damage they have done to the employability of young black people in America, who tend to have a lower-quality education to offer employers. Our response might be to improve our education standards, but we will need to do a great deal to improve our schools—one way might be to put them in the hands of the private sector.

Mrs. Gillan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government show a high level of hypocrisy because they know that the minimum wage will cause job losses, particularly among young people, and that is why the Low Pay Commission has specifically been given a brief to consider 18 to 24-year-olds? The minimum wage will undoubtedly cause job losses, particularly among young people.

Mrs. Gorman: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

I have pointed out that, although many ideas come from universities—high-tech, biotech, infotech and all the rest—the great majority of new jobs are low-tech jobs, which the Government have also made one of their major targets. Every day, those jobs supply us with our needs, whether they be fast food sandwiches, someone to unplug the drains, or street sweepers. All those jobs are important too, which we tend to forget when we talk about the wonders of new technology.

Perhaps new technology comes down to a new way of recording music or providing entertainment, but low-tech jobs are all valid ways of people earning a living, and they probably provide much more employment than the high-tech element. That is how the small corner shop and the factory under the railway arch contribute, and I implore the Government to understand that their policies of involving themselves in more regulations will have a destructive effect in that respect.

It is all very well to talk about business angels, but they rely on a flow of capital—people's savings—to invest in projects, which they will not do if Government start to increase the cost of money and to make it more difficult to raise capital. People's savings will be taken from them if the Government add on additional costs.

The Labour party's raid on pension funds has already been mentioned. Money will not be taken away, but everyone will have to contribute more to their pension funds. Those funds will inevitably have less money to invest in innovative ideas through business enterprise schemes, and innovation will suffer. Therefore, if the Government are practical and really want to get rid of barriers, I hope that they will reconsider the schemes they propose, not least those making money more expensive, which will undermine the wonderful economic legacy of the previous Government, who delivered one of the best economies in the world.

Mr. Beard: The hon. Lady has several times mentioned her aversion to the social chapter, which gives people security and decent conditions at work. Will she recognise that innovation depends on people taking risks and being creative, and that they will do that only if they are in secure employment? They will not do that if they are subject to the hire-and-fire culture that existed under the previous Government, whom the hon. Lady has supported, off and on, in past years. The policies of total deregulation and of putting people at risk, with people not knowing where their next wage is coming from and whether they will still be employed in a week's time, are total anathema to an innovative culture.

Mrs. Gorman: The hon. Gentleman must be aware that the previous Government reduced unemployment to an all-time low—despite many of the regulations imposed by the social chapter—but that each new regulation causes a distortion in employment patterns.

The latest, of which I hope the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West might like to remind the Minister, is that firms will be punished if they fail to consult their work force about key decisions. She knows what it is like in a small firm. The idea that an employer must make a decision quickly, but that, before that, he has to run around, tell all his employees and get them into a committee to agree it, is nonsense, yet the Government will innovate all these social chapter requirements, which will have a devastating effect on small businesses.

I refute the idea that security is important in entrepreneurship. It is not. I recommend that the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard) takes a look at that classic of entrepreneurship, albeit in the Victorian era, Samuel Smiles's "Self-Help". It is a wonderful book, recently reissued in paperback. It shows that nearly every innovation—including, I may say, those of Mr. Sugar, of Mr. Dyson, of the man who invented hovercraft, whose name I cannot remember, and of Henry Ford—resulted from the innovators losing their job, being hard up and needing to work their way out of poverty.

These days, people are prevented from doing so by the barriers created by the state to getting a business off the ground. I recommend that the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford takes heed of the measures that the previous Government introduced to get rid of unemployment, and that he warns Ministers in the present Government that much of what they propose to do is

likely to reverse the beneficial effects of those measures and undermine their policy of creating more jobs for youngsters.

Mr. Beard *rose—*

Mrs. Gorman: If the hon. Gentleman contributed that to the debate, I should be extremely pleased, but I am sure that, having made his contribution, he would prefer that I allowed someone else to get in on the act.

12.50 pm

Dr. Nick Palmer (Broxtowe): I declare a general interest in the subject. I have been an owner and publisher of a magazine for 14 years, and I advised my former company in the pharmaceutical industry.

I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on her maiden speech. I hope that, after I have been in the House for many years, I shall have learnt to speak as fluently and confidently as she did.

I support the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard), and disagree with the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) about security being unimportant for small business. I would not dream of introducing a major change in the way my business operated without consulting my staff, and I would be surprised if any business that did so was successful in the longer term. The hon. Lady may agree that a stable environment is important for business; similarly, a stable environment, including some security, is important for the people who work in it.

I shall now discuss the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, and the Government's response. I very much welcome the general trend of the remarks in that paper, but I have two reservations. The first, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford, concerns the dangers of the report's undiluted enthusiasm for the commercialisation of universities.

We often hear that universities are hard pressed for funds, and that they produce a great deal of important and valuable research. What could be more natural and more welcome than to reinvest in the university the proceeds of its research? It is motivating for people who work there; it contributes to the economy; surely it is an undiluted good. We should consider what happens in America, where that philosophy is widespread. I do not want to oppose development altogether, but I want to mention some possible drawbacks.

Such a philosophy leads to an excessive emphasis on research leading to immediate short-term marketability. The Select Committee says in passing that the effect is sometimes to undermine a focus on basic science, because it is very difficult to produce a marketable product from basic science. The more subtle and insidious effect in a university is that it tends to upgrade people who can produce a product that can be sold and to downgrade people who have been asked, perhaps for some years, to work in an area that does not happen to have that benefit. We must be careful that any change does not have that effect.

The philosophy has introduced, broadly in the United States and increasingly in Britain also, a reluctance among academics to co-operate to the extent that was possible in the past. There has always been competition between academics, which is natural and welcome, but there has also been a tradition of sharing preliminary results, working together towards a joint goal. Some universities and colleges, in this country and overseas, instruct their staff not to consult staff from other institutions on certain projects, because it might result in another institution achieving a marketable product first.

How can we prevent those side effects without killing the goose that lays the golden egg? We should not allow universities to become primarily dependent on marketing products as a method of finance. We must ensure that the Government continue to be responsible for the bulk of their finance, so that universities are responsive to the national need to upgrade the British people's level of education, giving everyone the best possible chance to produce a successful and congenial society.

My second reservation about the Select Committee report—I heard my concern echoed in one or two speeches today—is a certain insularity. It is the belief that, if a company is to flourish, it must find finance and support from sources in its immediate vicinity. The report says that, unlike in America, venture capital in Britain is somewhat cautious, and banks are extremely cautious about taking risks.

Governments can react to that in two ways. One way, which we all support, is that they encourage British venture capital and banks to take greater risks and try to build up institutions and rules to help them do that. They should also try to help small businesses find venture capital and research partners overseas. The future of markets in Britain is not small groups of companies clustering together against the whirlwinds of the global economy; it is British companies thriving in the world economy, in partnership with research institutions and other companies at home and abroad. The Government's role is to promote that.

What do small businesses most need to help them innovate? Small businesses are not necessarily those formed when someone working in an area sees an opportunity, grabs it and makes a market out of it. While those are welcome, they are not the problem.

The problem arises when a person with a good idea has neither a business background nor widespread contacts, and has difficulty moving into the market. He or she then needs assistance to set up, and advice and support not just with the corporation process, for which there is fairly widespread support, but, as mentioned in the Select Committee report, with patenting and trademarks.

That is such a headache for many small businesses that the Government should consider providing a service to assist small companies to register patents and trademarks, so that each small company is not forced to reinvent the wheel, and to prevent a company from registering a patent expensively, too early or with loopholes, so that it is cheated of the benefits of its innovation. New businesses also need to build research partnerships with related companies so that they can not only use the immediate idea but invest in the future.

Small businesses need to find partners for design, as was said earlier, and for help in marketing. A classic British disease is that we are good at producing products, but not so good at marketing them once they have been produced. Another requirement is access to venture capital.

[Dr. Nick Palmer]

Those conditions are not unique to Britain. Abroad, services and additional help for new companies to thrive are increasingly provided by internet links and long-distance national support networks. In some countries, that is done in an ad hoc way—individual entrepreneurs are setting up websites offering advice—and in other countries it is undertaken as a coherent strategy.

Even hon. Members who are committed to an entirely free market with no Government intervention may still consider that to be a legitimate area in which Government can be a real help to small businesses, by providing internet support wherever they are across Britain. For that reason, I welcome the enterprise zone initiative mentioned by my hon. Friend the Minister, which bears the potential to be expanded a great deal more.

The present initiative, as I understand it, offers advice on the internet to small companies. That could be expanded into a powerhouse for small businesses, providing an area to seek partnerships, an area to seek technical support, an area to seek finance and an area to market the products in retail virtual malls, as has been increasingly the practice in the United States.

That will be done by individuals across the country in any case, whether the Government do it or not, but we can help to give our small businesses a leap ahead of the competition worldwide if we take the initiative and use the enterprise zone concept to build on the possibility of support for small companies.

I believe that British businesses are increasingly willing to embrace innovation, if there is a stable environment and active Government support, which will help them to take the risk and succeed on the international market. I welcome the Government's commitment to the enterprise zone and their international orientation, and I hope that we will develop those initiatives to provide the basis for a powerhouse of British small business in the future.

1.2 pm

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on her maiden speech. We are all pleased to welcome to the Chamber an hon. Member with practical, down-to-earth experience of small businesses. If it is not presumptuous for a new Member like myself to say so, I think that she will make a terrific contribution to the House.

I shall make four points. First, all successful small businesses are led by entrepreneurs. There is a very limited role for Government in innovation. The Government must resist the temptation to interfere and intervene, and leave it to the hundreds of thousands of small business people who run their own businesses and do so successfully.

Secondly, the Minister should not underestimate what has happened over the past 20 years. There has been a radical change in British industry over that time. In south Wales, Scotland and the north-east—the traditional industrial areas—the steel industry, shipbuilding and coal have gone, and have been replaced by a multitude of new factories making new products. We are now the biggest semiconductor manufacturer in Europe. One should not rubbish what has happened over the past 20 years. The reform has had a profound effect on the British economy.

Thirdly, we have focused on high-tech businesses, by and large, today. However, there are many small businesses in market towns and small industrial estates throughout the country making traditional products. For those businesses, innovation is just as important as it is for high-tech companies. The product life cycle has shortened tremendously in the past few years, as rapid prototyping, stereolithography, computer-aided design and more flexible machine tools have made new products quicker to produce. As a result, traditional companies are under the same pressure to innovate as the more sexy high-tech companies, so that sector must not be ignored.

Finally, there will be innovation only if small businesses are successful and make profits. After the first five months of the new Government, the signs are not encouraging. There have been five increases in interest rates, there is an overvalued exchange rate, more regulation is threatened, with the setting up of the food standards agency, flexibility has been undermined by the social chapter, small businesses face a higher pension bill, and the apparent relaxation of planning policy guidance 6 for supermarkets in towns will undermine many small businesses in traditional high streets. In addition, the scope of the competition Bill has been widened to include the vertical integration of many industries, including the pharmaceutical industry, the public house sector and electrical retailing. My hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) has already mentioned the minimum wage.

After only five months of a new Government, the outlook for small business is not good. We heard the Minister using management speak and business consultancy words such as innovation and benchmarking, but it all comes down to profitability. If businesses are profitable, they will reinvest in new products, design and innovation. If they are under pressure, they will not. I know from my own experience how easy it is to cut back on product development when times are hard. It is one of the first items of spending that small companies can cut out when they have to.

I beseech the Minister to look hard at what the Government are now doing and to do what she can to keep regulation to a minimum.

1.6 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): I start by declaring an interest as the executive chairman of a small company. Let me say what a pleasure it has been to listen to the speeches today, particularly the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones). She represents the west midlands, the vibrant and vigorous powerhouse of industry, business and commerce—the real engine room of Britain's industrial prosperity. It was refreshing to hear a speech that was full of experience and wisdom based on professional experience.

The hon. Lady said that she wanted to take part in one of the big debates. What was particularly delightful about her speech was that although today's big debate has been characterised by some extremely long speeches, hers most certainly was not. It was succinct and to the point, and she set us all an admirable example, as did my hon.

Friends the Members for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) and for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), who speaks with such authority on enterprise and the small companies sector.

I listened with sympathy to the Minister's speech. It was full of good intentions, and she recited the departmental orthodoxy quite admirably. I am not in any sense being cynical—far from it. However, the hon. Lady is potentially the victim of circumstances quite beyond her control. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk so eloquently suggested, the prognosis for the small business sector certainly does not look good. The Minister is likely to be the victim of the action or in some cases the inaction and prejudice of some of her ministerial colleagues in other Departments.

We must go to the heart of the matter, which was very well synthesised by my hon. Friends the Members for North Norfolk and for Billericay. Why do people go into small business in the first place? It may be because they have an idea of their own; perhaps they are in a big company and wish to pursue an area of expertise that has not been fully developed in an overlarge organisation; or they may feel that they want to make money. That is what we must emphasise. People do not innovate for innovation's sake. They innovate because they have to maintain their market share or expand it. Ultimately, if they are entrepreneurs, they have to be the driving force of a company that will make money, increase profits and thereby employ people. Such entrepreneurs can offer a future, which they can hand over to their family. I speak most particularly of the family business sector.

As capitalisation of so many small enterprises is low, they are particularly vulnerable to upward changes in interest rates, as my hon. Friends the Members for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) and for Billericay pointed out. We have had five interest rate rises from the Government already. The Government are taking a very relaxed, hands-off approach. The implication is that it is not their fault, because the Bank of England is independent, but five interest rate rises in five months is a bit much. It is symptomatic of something fundamentally wrong.

What is wrong is that the Chancellor—I spoke of the vicarious effect of the actions of the Minister's colleagues on her Department—was not willing to grasp the nettle of burgeoning demand in the economy with a much tighter fiscal stance in his Budget. He was lauded almost to the rooftops by Labour Members at the time, but many of us old lags on the Opposition Benches recognise that, come the winter, there will be much less to cheer about in his Budget.

Interest rates are one aspect that affects small businesses, but there are of course a number of others. There has been allusion in the debate to the effect of the abolition of dividend interest tax relief on pension funds. Some small companies might have to run a pension fund of their own, so they would have to increase their contributions to maintain their employees' pensions at the expected level. Perhaps the employees have personal pensions. If so, small companies would again have to increase their wages for their employees, to maintain the level of pension for which they had planned. Both those instances represent upward pressures on costs and wages.

It is not as if the owners or managers of small businesses did not have enough to do—they do. They have enough preoccupations on their minds. Many of them are one-man bands. I think that it is valid to compare them with the delightful characters who go down the streets of Santiago in Chile with a penny whistle between their teeth, an accordion in their arms and cymbals strapped to their knees. The sound is wonderful and they maintain the tune, but they are working flat out all the time—and so are entrepreneurs, managers and owners of small businesses. They have so many preoccupations, such as pay-as-you-earn, value added tax, the uniform business rate, the demands of planning departments and environmental health, which all have to be addressed.

The Government must be realistic. They have to try to reduce the burdens on small businesses. How can they do so while, at the same time, they have embraced the social chapter? The European Union is not the friend of small business. The Government must abjure some of the delusions with which they came to office. The social chapter and all the directives that will flow from it are one aspect.

Another much more alarming aspect is the process of economic convergence, which is inherent in the process of ever closer union via economic and monetary union, on which we embarked at Maastricht. That will ultimately, in the grand design of the new Labour Government—because that is what they want—lead to our participation in the single currency. What will it mean? It will mean that more of our hard-earned taxpayers' money and the hard-earned profits from our small and medium-sized enterprises will go to the European Union to fund the cohesion fund and the structural fund—the engines whose aim is to build up competitor enterprises in other parts of the Union. That is utterly the wrong approach.

Even if the single currency is achieved, the central bank in Frankfurt will not set an optimum interest rate for small and medium-sized enterprises in Britain: it will set an interest rate that is appropriate for the macro-economy of the European Union. For the success and prosperity of small businesses in this country, we need a Government over whom we have democratic control and who can keep fiscal discipline here. We need a Government who will not have to bail out other countries' pension fund deficits—which we would have to do if we participated in the single currency—and who will keep interest rates low. There is no objective that is of greater importance for small businesses.

Mr. Beard: How did small and medium-sized businesses fare when the previous Government—whom I believe the hon. Gentleman supported—raised interest rates to 15 per cent. plus?

Mr. Wilkinson: It might interest the hon. Gentleman to know that I voted consistently against Maastricht, and my constituency association repeatedly submitted resolutions to our party conference that called for a reduction in interest rates, rather than the astronomic levels that were consequential upon our insane membership of the exchange rate mechanism. Incidentally, we shall have to rejoin the mechanism—if the president of the Bundesbank is to be believed—if we are to join the single currency. Furthermore, I did not support the financial perspective laid down at the Edinburgh summit, according to which our country will have to pay 3 per cent. extra in real terms every year until the end of the decade to the European Union.

[Mr. Wilkinson]

Our Government should seek to reduce taxes on business and, to their credit, they cut corporation tax by 2p in the pound. This was a great step forward and I whole-heartedly applaud it. However, the Government do not understand the importance of facilitating investment in small companies, especially family enterprises. We should have a threshold for the smallest companies, below which they would pay no corporation tax. It is true of personal taxation, because one does not pay income tax until one has passed a certain threshold, and the same should be true of small businesses. They rely on their profits for innovation, expansion and the creation of new jobs. If a climate of investment is to be fully encouraged, we must also abolish inheritance tax and capital gains tax.

One final aspect of our European policy was discussed in European Standing Committee B on Wednesday and has not yet been resolved—Britain's participation in the fifth framework programme for science and technology. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham, played a distinguished part, as one would expect, in the debate in Committee on Wednesday. In this, we are seeing another case in point of the dangers for small business in the European Union. If the EU were a free trade area and nothing else, small business would do well out of it, but it is the process of political construction of a European super-state that will impose burdens on small business, as it will on all our people.

If the Commission has its way, under the programme for science, technology, research and development, this country is likely to be required to pay an extra 25 per cent. over the next five years. We are already the second largest net contributor to the European Union. It will be an opportunity cost to small business, as to the whole of British society, including the British taxpayer.

As for innovation in science and technology, the small countries of Europe are delighted at the prospect of an extra 25 per cent., because they have small science and technology bases. We are at the forefront of scientific and technological innovation in Europe, so we shall bankroll the improvement of science and technology in the smaller countries of Europe, which will ultimately become our competitors.

Through their corporate taxation, our small business men are required to pay for that process. I hardly believe that it makes sense. Their interests are even less likely to be safeguarded when, after the Amsterdam treaty is ratified, we abolish the veto on such matters, and lay ourselves open to the vagaries of majority voting—or rather, to the small countries ganging up against us.

Lest people may think that I am negative, let me add that I am not. I believe passionately in the role of small companies in export. We have not discussed this area of policy in the debate. I am encouraged by the fact that the new Government take a consistent interest in the subject, as did their predecessor.

The export promoters in the Department of Trade and Industry do a wonderful job in lending the expertise that they have gained in trade, commerce and industry, especially to small enterprises, which need help with exports.

Secondly, our much maligned missions throughout the world do an admirable job. I have always found the commercial sections most willing to provide assistance, to answer queries, to give help with leads, to suggest which companies may be appropriate for joint ventures, and so on.

Furthermore, that is true not only of the local commercial section but increasingly of the whole of a British mission overseas, which is usually whole-heartedly engaged, from the ambassador down, in the process of export promotion. There is support for British trade fairs, British trade missions, British weeks and other activities, all of which is fully provided by our missions abroad.

I must add a final plaudit to the chambers of commerce in our country. They may be regarded as somewhat old-fashioned institutions, inasmuch as they are funded by businesses themselves and are not an apparatus superimposed by Government. They are responsive and understand the needs of industries great and small—in contrast to the Confederation of British Industry, for example, which these days is the spokesman for corporatist Britain and does not comprehend the needs of small business in the same way. I hope that the Minister will do everything that she can to support the chambers of commerce.

The debate has been timely and worth while. I hope that there will be realism about the long-term consequences for British business, especially small business, of our Gadarene rush towards participation in a European single currency.

1.23 pm

Mrs. Roche: We have had an excellent and stimulating debate, and there has been general agreement about the importance of our small and medium-sized enterprises.

There are three main things that we can say about small businesses. First, the experience of the past decade—in this country, the EU and elsewhere—has shown that jobs come from the small and medium-sized sector. Secondly—this reflects on the point made by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) about wealth creation—small businesses are good examples of people creating opportunities for themselves, their families and their communities by rolling up their sleeves and getting on with creating the wealth that this country needs so much. Thirdly, smaller companies are often at the forefront of innovation, creativity and the competitive edge, and they will show the way to rest of this country as we go into the next century.

We have had an excellent debate with many speeches of a high calibre—with one notable exception. I say this more in sorrow than in anger, but I am referring to the speech of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan). If I were being kind—I always try to be kind to the hon. Lady—I would say that her speech was wide ranging. However, she had absolutely nothing to say about innovation. People in our small and creative firms who are following this debate—and who were pleased that the Government had made time for this debate—will be disappointed that Her Majesty's Opposition had nothing to say about innovation.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham referred rightly to regulation, and I share the desire of the Opposition to do something about deregulation. But she

has a cheek, considering the record of her party in government. The Conservatives' deregulation initiative, which started in 1994, created 13 times as many regulations as it scrapped, yet the hon. Lady has the nerve to talk about deregulation. Only one member of the previous Government's deregulation task force came from the small business sector. There were more ex-Tory Members of Parliament on the task force than representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises. Half of our task force is composed of small business representatives—a practical example which I hope will delight the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), who made a good speech about the practical nature of what needs to be done.

The Access Business initiative seeks simplicity in terms of central Government, but also—I hope this will please the hon. Member for Billericay—looks at local government, and I am delighted that local government is represented. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham had the cheek to talk about small firm exemptions, but what was her party's record? The Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 was passed by the previous Government. When in opposition, Labour proposed an exemption for firms employing fewer than 10 people but the then Conservative Government voted that proposal down. She should not lecture us about deregulation when her party's record was so appalling.

Mrs. Gillan: May I congratulate the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on an excellent maiden speech, and ask whether the Minister is now saying that she will reconsider the answer she gave me in a letter and look at the possibility of the exemptions for small firms?

Mrs. Roche: First, I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones)—that is at least something on which the hon. Lady and I can agree. I shall return later to my hon. Friend's excellent speech.

We expect some consistency from the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham. I know that it is the practice of members of the shadow Trade and Industry team to reverse everything that they previously believed, but if business—large, small and medium-sized—is to take them seriously, they must be consistent.

The hon. Lady spoke about what we should do about late payment. The only word for that is the wonderful Yiddish expression, chutzpah. For the benefit of the House, chutzpah is defined by the young man who murders both his parents and pleads in mitigation that he is an orphan. The hon. Lady's speech was a clear example of chutzpah.

Let us consider the previous Government's record on late payments to small businesses: £230 million was owed to small firms, and in 1995-96, the Treasury—let us not forget that the hon. Lady was a Minister—paid 14 per cent. of its bills late. I am not surprised by that record because, as the hon. Lady will recall, the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), boasted about "stringing along" his creditors when he was in business.

The Government intend to introduce a statutory right to interest on late payments. I am glad that we issued the Green Paper so quickly and that it had such a good response. All recent surveys, as well as some earlier ones, show that small businesses overwhelmingly support a statutory right to interest—in the most recent, the figure was 80 per cent. The Institute of Directors surveyed its members in response to our Green Paper proposals. There were about 2,000 responses—a very high rate indeed—of which 69 per cent. supported a statutory right to interest.

I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood, who has a history of support for a statutory right to interest. I look forward to discussing our proposals with him. I rather wondered, when he intervened on the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham, whether she was wobbling in her position, and I rather hope that in the end she may see sense and support the Government.

Mrs. Gillan *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Wilkinson: I thank the Minister for her generous remarks. As we are in a period of bipartisan good will, I want to make some suggestions on the Green Paper proposals. I reiterate that nearly all the small business men whom I have met want either a statutory right to interest or some other statutory mechanism to ensure that they are paid on time and get the benefits of a good cash flow, and I agree with them entirely.

Mrs. Roche: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman and I would be delighted to discuss the matter with him. He will also be interested to know that the statutory right to interest is not the only measure that we propose.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West, in her excellent maiden speech, also spoke about late payment, so she, too, may like to know that, apart from the statutory right to interest, we are working with all small business organisations on credit management and other measures to combat late payment. One small business organisation is to publish league tables to show how companies perform, and it is important for the Government to set tough targets, which we intend to do.

I welcome the remarks of the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood and my door is always open to him to discuss further how we can tackle the problem. The issue is so serious that we should all give it our attention.

I am not really surprised that the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham did not speak about innovations—disappointed, but not surprised—because every working day during the previous Parliament a small business went bust every three minutes; it is not surprising that the Conservatives are embarrassed by their appalling record of boom-and-bust politics.

I mentioned that there had been a number of excellent speeches.

Mrs. Gillan: The hon. Lady has clearly moved on to other speakers and has finished her analysis of my speech. Perhaps she will comment on the Home Office export initiative matter that I raised. Did she know that it was being cancelled by the Home Office and does she believe that 51 days' notice is reasonable? Did she know, was she consulted and does she think it reasonable?

Mrs. Roche: I answered the hon. Lady earlier. If she requires any further details, I will be happy to write to her, as I am sure my Home Office colleagues will be.

[Mrs. Roche]

My hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) as usual made an excellent speech, which is a tribute to his knowledge in this area. Rightly, he spoke about the Cambridge phenomenon and also about the research infrastructure. He paid proper regard to the contribution that science parks and incubators also make in this important area. I think that his points about London were well made, not least because I am a fellow London Member of Parliament.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) made some excellent points as ever and I thank him for his kind remarks about what this Government are doing. He made a good point about the importance of design, saying, and I absolutely agree, that all firms should realise the importance of design in a practical way. Design is not a luxury to be added on if time allows. It is essential to business success. It is important not merely to new companies, but to older companies as they refocus. I have seen some good examples.

I also agree about the importance to the development and prosperity of small firms of new technology—and information technology in particular. Given my responsibility for the telecommunications and IT industries, I realise that many new initiatives are coming from that direction.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton also made a valuable point about new product design, which is particularly important in manufacturing and in industries where products perhaps have a shelf life of two or three years. Tool making is one example of an environment where such a base in skills and design is needed—and computer-aided design clearly plays an important part.

The hon. Gentleman also rightly referred to the century date change problem. That is a very serious problem indeed and that is why the Government have committed nearly £1 million this year to Action 2000 and, I am delighted to say, have appointed Don Cruickshank as its chairman. There will also be a full-time director and staff. The hon. Gentleman was also right to point to the skills shortage in that area. That is why I was delighted to host a skills summit with the industry this summer.

The hon. Gentleman rightly referred to the SMART scheme, to which I pay tribute as it has clearly had quite an effect. In that connection, I must mention the teaching company scheme, which is of great value to small business, and particularly the connection with the university. I am pleased to say that it was introduced by a Labour Government in 1975.

Everyone who heard the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West appreciated what an excellent maiden speech it was. It came very much from her own knowledge. One of the great pleasures of having the privilege of being a Member of this House is working with men and women who bring to it their knowledge and experience. That is true of hon. Members on both sides of the House and can only add to the quality and value of our debates. I am pleased that my hon. Friend waited to make her maiden speech in this debate. I agree with her remarks on paperwork, regulation and late payment. All those points were well made. The people of Wolverhampton, South-West have an excellent representative.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) made a well-informed speech that ranged over several important issues. I am grateful for his support for what the Government are doing on late payment. We would wish to talk to him about that. It is an important issue, worthy of support from all parties. I noted his points about business links. I hope that he will appreciate our publication last month of the vision statement for enhanced business links, which has been warmly welcomed not only by the business link network and its staff but by small businesses. The document tries to bring small businesses on board.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West mentioned the quality of advice, which is tackled in the enhanced business links vision statement. We have tried to improve quality at all levels, not only at adviser level but in respect of board development. I am delighted that we will be working with the Institute of Directors on board management.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare mentioned mutual guarantee schemes, which have an important part to play. That is why I was delighted to attend the launch of a scheme by the National Association of Guarantee Societies and the Co-op bank. Business links brought to that scheme the advice that is so necessary for new, start-up and growing businesses.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr. Beard) made some good points about our science base and paid a tribute, which I warmly endorse, to our Nobel prize winners. He spoke about the importance of development and of its connection with marketing. It is a similar point to that which was made about design. Marketing is not an add-on but essential, which is why I was pleased to speak at the recent Industrial Marketing Council conference about how to bring together marketing and innovation. My hon. Friend's points were well made. There is Government support for strengthening links between university researchers and business-led development. My hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry will be making some developments in that area shortly.

It will not surprise the hon. Member for Billericay that I did not agree with everything that she said, but there were points that struck a note that I endorse. I wholly disagree with what she said about the minimum wage and the social chapter. At its annual conference, the Federation of Small Businesses endorsed the idea of a sensibly set minimum wage. The hon. Lady knows that the social chapter makes special mention of small firms and states:

"directives adopted . . . shall avoid imposing administrative, financial and legal constraints in a way which would hold back the creation and development of small and medium sized undertakings."

The point is already covered.

I thank the hon. Member for Billericay for her warm words to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West. She was right that the practical nature of my hon. Friend's work will be of use to the House. I agree with the hon. Lady about on-the-job training. People running their own small businesses do not always have the time to go on training courses from nine to five. They often want advice or information at midnight or 6 am. Make no mistake, those are the hours that many small business men work to ensure that their companies are successful. For that reason I hope that the hon. Lady will

find our initiatives attractive. We are developing the university for industry so that practical skills training can be given at work. Enterprise zones are another important project. I agree with the hon. Lady that there is something extremely satisfying about seeing young people learning from skilled older people about how a job is done. I hope that we will be able to establish much more skills training at the workplace.

I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of mentoring. The school tours made by Alan Sugar have been warmly welcomed by them and they are yet another way of communicating to young people the attractions of a career in industry and the fact that entrepreneurship is good.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West mentioned the Prince's Youth Business Trust. A great deal of its work is devoted to mentoring and older, experienced business people have given much back to young entrepreneurs who, in turn, are used as role models.

I was pleased to note that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) mentioned the enterprise zone and its potential benefits. He also described how research partnerships know no national boundaries. I was in Germany recently with a number of representatives of creative small businesses for discussions with their German counterparts. It was interesting to note how large research projects often lead to collaboration between different countries.

I found the speech of the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) slightly disappointing because he seemed to suggest that initiatives such as benchmarking are not that important. I fundamentally disagree, as does the CBI. If I may say as gently as I can, that attitude shows how out of touch with business the Conservative party has become.

The hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood made a charming and courteous speech. It will not come as a surprise to him to learn that I cannot agree with much of his speech, but I find common cause with him about our small business organisations. I find my dealings with such organisations one of the most valuable aspects of my work. The chambers of commerce, the Forum of Private Business, the Federation of Small Businesses, the small firms councils of the CBI and the Institute of Directors play a valuable role in pressing forward the required agenda, and I pay tribute to their efforts.

I also agreed with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of export promotion. The idea of people who have sold themselves abroad then going into government is an excellent one. I have been abroad with such individuals and I know what added value they bring to the country. I note what he said about the uniform business rate, but I gently remind him that it was introduced by the previous Conservative Government. I accept that it has been the cause of great dismay to many businesses and we may have some fruitful discussions about it.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the mystery ingredient, the motive, which makes people go out and work all hours. What makes them innovators? He believes that the answer is that they want to make money and create wealth. I agree, but they also want to use their great resources and skills to achieve something. The Government applaud their endeavours because they are vital to Britain's future, and we are absolutely determined to give them all the support that they need.

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Mr. Paul Tyler be discharged from the Select Committee on Procedure and Mr. Edward Davey be added to the Committee.—[*Ms Bridget Prentice.*]

Lockerbie

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Ms Bridget Prentice.*]

1.49 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): For the past 30 years, Nelson Mandela has been something of an icon for the left. His prestige for what he has done is absolutely unquestioned; therefore, surely, it behoves us to listen to what he says on what might be an awkward subject.

The connection goes back to the time when Nelson Mandela wrote what I think was his only letter to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) as Prime Minister, which was about Lockerbie. I do not hide from anyone the fact that I was given a copy by Tiny Rowland. When there was a change of Government, the first meeting Mr. Mandela had with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister lasted an hour and, at Mr. Mandela's insistence, 40 minutes of it was taken up with Lockerbie.

Mr. Mandela then came to the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in Edinburgh and made a much publicised statement saying that in his considered judgment no country should be claimant, prosecutor and judge in the same case and in a situation such as Lockerbie. That was his view and I do not think that I distort it. It was his opinion—tactfully expressed—that we should take seriously the idea of a trial in a third, neutral country. Indeed, that has been the view of South Africa, to whose personnel I have spoken, and of many other countries for a long time.

The purpose of this debate is to go through—I hope without distortion—the objections to such a course of action and then to try to refute them. I believe in being totally candid with the House of Commons: I am not a lawyer, so I have taken advice. That advice comes predominantly from Professor Robert Black QC, professor of Scots law in the university of Edinburgh. One of the tasks to which the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), must address himself is to say why the Government lawyers believe that their opinion is superior to that of the Queen's Counsel who is professor of Scots law in the university of Edinburgh.

There should be a serious reply to Professor Black's points. As soon as I knew that this debate was to take place, I submitted those points to the Foreign Office because it would be unacceptable suddenly to come to the Floor of the House of Commons, produce legal arguments and expect my hon. Friend the Minister to answer off the top of his head. I confess that the first part of my speech will be a little—but only a little—longer because of the good fortune of the previous debate having ended early, but I do not expect my hon. Friend to reply to the questions in the second part other than in writing and after he has had time to consider them.

In October 1993, the legal advisers to the two Libyans accused of the Lockerbie bombing announced that their clients were not prepared to surrender themselves for trial either in Scotland or in the United States. In an attempt to resolve this impasse, Professor Black formulated in January 1994 a detailed proposal for the setting up of a court operating under the law and procedure of Scotland, but sitting in a neutral venue such as The Hague. The proposal was accepted in writing by the head of the Libyans' defence team and by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Libya on behalf of his Government. Before coming to the debate, I have checked again that the Libyan Government would accept such a proposition.

If implemented, the proposal would secure six objectives: first, a trial in which the governing law and procedure will be the law and procedure of Scotland; secondly, a trial in which the prosecution will be conducted by the Scottish public prosecutor, the Lord Advocate, or his authorised representative; thirdly, a trial in which the defence of the accused will be in the hands of independent Scottish solicitors and counsel appointed by the accused; fourthly, a trial in which the jury will be replaced by a panel of judges presided over and chaired by a judge of the Scottish High Court of Justiciary with responsibility for directing the panel on Scottish law and procedure; fifthly, a trial in which, if the accused are convicted, they will serve any sentence of imprisonment in a prison in Scotland; and sixthly, a trial from which any appeals will be heard and determined in Scotland by the High Court of Justiciary in its capacity as the Scottish court of criminal appeal.

Successive Lord Advocates and Foreign Secretaries have refused to countenance such a proposal. Do the British Government really believe that the principle of having a trial within the borders of Scotland—that is the issue—is of such overriding and transcendent importance that if it cannot be achieved there should be no trial at all, even one that satisfies the six conditions that Professor Black and I have set out? Are the Government saying that the location of the trial in Scotland is more important than that there should be a trial? If so, they have a woefully distorted set of priorities. That is also the view not only of Professor Black, but of many members of the solid and careful legal establishment in the city of Edinburgh.

Over the years, Government sources have put forward six objections to the proposal. I shall set those out, along with what we believe to be the answers to them. The first objection is that the proposal to set up a non-jury court applying Scottish criminal law and procedure, but sitting outside Scotland, implies that a fair trial could not be obtained in Scotland and thus casts an unwarranted slur on the Scottish system of criminal justice.

The response of Professor Black and myself is that the only feature of the Scottish criminal justice system that those representing the Libyan accused find unacceptable is the role played in it by the jury. Each and every other facet of Scottish solemn criminal procedure is acceptable to them. They contend that, in a case that has already received unprecedented publicity in the media, including widespread dissemination of photographs of the accused, and which would undoubtedly generate further publicity once the accused surrendered themselves for trial, it would be impossible to find a jury of 15 people who could bring to the task of assessing the evidence against the accused minds that were unaffected or uninfluenced by pre-trial publicity.

I say in passing to my hon. Friend the Minister that on one occasion I had to telephone BBC Scotland and ask whether it was right before any trial to refer to the two men as "the bombers". BBC Scotland admitted that it was a terrible mistake—and so it was. That is part of the background to the situation that I am discussing.

To hold, to express and to act on such a view involves no slur on the Scottish system of criminal justice but is simply a recognition of the liability of human beings to

be influenced consciously or unconsciously by the deluge of information and speculation that has for years accompanied this case.

The recent conviction of Louise Woodward by a jury in Massachusetts has given rise to concern, among other things, about the ability of that jury to return a just verdict, solely on the evidence led in the courtroom, in a case that had been the subject of so much pre-trial publicity. Similar concerns are surely not self-evidently baseless in the case of those accused of the Lockerbie bombing, especially in view of the fact that Scottish criminal procedure, unlike that of the United States, prohibits the questioning of potential jurors with a view to excluding from service any who might have been influenced by what they had seen, heard or read in the media before the trial.

I appreciate that the Scottish court system is different from that of England. However, when travelling in the Arab world I have heard people ask, "What about the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four? What will happen to the Libyan Two?" That may be unfair, but that is the perception in countries with which we have no extradition treaty. I should also say in parentheses that I have been careful not to go to Libya since the charges were laid.

The second objection is that there are formidable difficulties in implementing the proposal to set up a non-jury court applying Scottish criminal law and procedure but sitting outside Scotland in a place such as The Hague.

The response of Professor Black and myself is to ask: do the Government contend that it is beyond the capabilities and expertise of the Scottish parliamentary draftsmen in the Lord Advocate's Department, in consultation with the Crown Office and the Scottish Office Home Department's criminal justice division, to draft legislation setting up such a court and providing that it shall apply all the rules of evidence and procedure applicable to High Court trials in Scotland, save only those relating to the presence and functions of the jury?

We also ask: do the Government contend that such legislation, if promoted by the Government, would be defeated in either House of Parliament? That is unthinkable.

Do the Government contend that if such a court were constituted and the Libyan accused surrendered themselves for trial before it neither the Government of Holland nor the United Nations would be willing to assume responsibility for the custody of the accused in The Hague pending and during the trial? I have no doubt that the Dutch Government would be co-operative.

Now we come to the third objection—that the fact that the proposal for a "neutral venue" Scottish court provides that the court shall operate without a jury renders it unacceptable.

The response of Professor Black and myself is that two questions arise. First, as the jury in criminal proceedings is conceived of as a safeguard for the interests and civil liberties of the accused, what overriding or compelling interest has the prosecution to insist on jury trial where the accused and their legal advisers have, as in this case, waived their right thereto?

Secondly, if the Government believe that the presence of a jury in serious criminal cases is always and without exception essential, why were non-jury courts—the Diplock courts—set up for the trial of terrorism offences in Northern Ireland?

The fourth objection is that the US Government would or might refuse to make essential evidence available to a "neutral venue" Scottish court. My response and that of Professor Black is that section 3 of the Criminal Justice (International Co-operation) Act 1990 provides a mechanism for evidence not already in the prosecutor's possession, including documents and articles, to be obtained by invoking, through the letter of request procedure, the aid of a court with jurisdiction in the country in which the evidence is located.

Section 273 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995—as you chaired that Committee, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will remember it well—provides for the evidence to be given by witnesses outside the United Kingdom through a live television link. The procedure involves invoking, again by means of a letter of request, the aid of a court with jurisdiction in the country in which the witness is resident.

Do the Government really suggest, first, that a court in the United States would not respond to such a letter of request from the Lord Advocate or a judge in the High Court of Justiciary appointed to preside over a "neutral venue" court or, secondly, that the US Government have either the constitutional authority or the desire to impede the US courts in responding to such a letter of request?

The fifth objection is short. It is simply that accused persons should not be allowed to choose or have a say in where they are tried. Professor Black and I believe that that supposed principle has already been breached by Security Council resolutions 731 and 748, which impose on the Libyan Government an obligation to hand over the accused for trial in either the United Kingdom or the United States. The choice between those venues rests with the Libyans. What principle is therefore infringed by a third choice, which the Libyans have said in writing that they would accept—namely, that the trial be held before a court applying Scottish law and procedure, presided over by a Scottish judge, but sitting outside Scotland?

The final objection is that there is no guarantee that if a "neutral venue" Scottish court were set up the two Libyan accused would surrender themselves for trial before it.

In a letter to Professor Black dated 12 January 1994, and reiterated since, Dr. Ibrahim Legwell, the head of the legal team representing the accused, states that they would surrender themselves for trial before such a court. In a letter of the same date, the Libyan Deputy Foreign Minister states that the Libyan Government would place no obstacle in the path of such surrender. Within the past fortnight, Colonel Gaddafi confirmed that to President Nelson Mandela. We must make a judgment: is it likely that Colonel Gaddafi would renege on a commitment, publicly made, to President Mandela? In any event, what on earth could be lost by putting him to the test?

I ask the Government yet again to consider the exceptional circumstances of nine long years of argument, nine long years that have been harrowing for the relatives and extremely detrimental to our relations not only with the Arab world, but with the Organisation of African Unity, and to British industry. As I have often said in the House, the decision makers in Libya were mostly educated not in the universities of the United States, as in the case of some other Arab countries, but in Britain, and would be well disposed towards Britain and inclined to place orders, thereby creating jobs in Britain.

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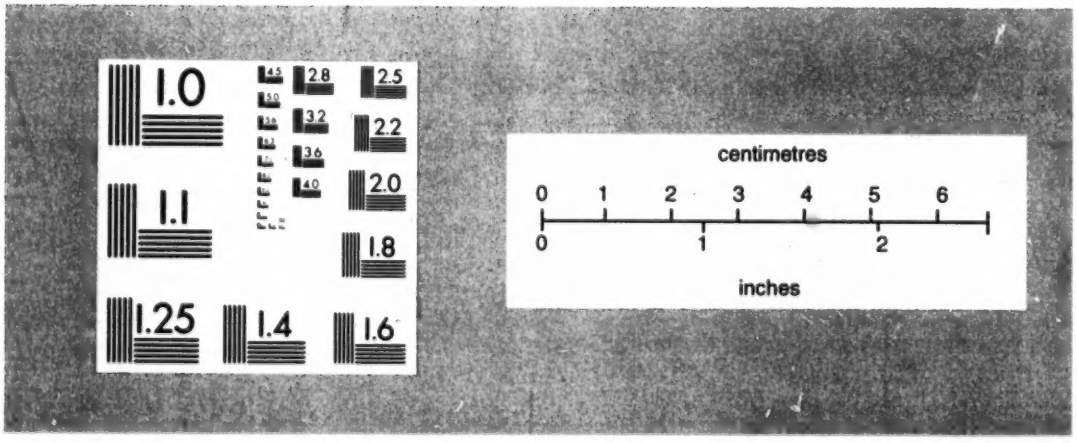

[Mr. Tam Dalyell]

It is strangely poignant and appropriate that we should consider the matter of the Lockerbie disaster at this time. It was on 6 November 1991 that James T. MacDougall, procurator fiscal in Dumfries, petitioned for the issuance of arrest warrants in the names of Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed Al Megrahi and Al Amin Khalifa Fhimah, the two Libyans so far accused of the murder of 270 souls from 21 nations.

The right hon. Lord Fraser of Carmyllie, the then Lord Advocate, read the warrants before the world's media in Edinburgh on 14 November 1991, and declined any form of detailed comment, other than to state that

"warrants have been issued, the two accused should surrender themselves for trial".

Since then, Lord Fraser and his successors, Lord Rodger and Lord Hardie, have on the whole, like Lord Mackay of Drumadoon, declined any form of comment.

Contrast that proper stance with the handling of the matter in the United States. As the Attorney General was reading a grand jury indictment in Washington, the Department of State was issuing two documents that have been described as the "most contemptuous" seen in the whole long Lockerbie story. The first is a rationale as to how the original suspects—Iran and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, General Command—could not have carried out the bombing. The second, entitled "Additional information on the bombing of PanAm flight 103", makes various untested claims about who, how, where and why the bombing was carried out, and gives a detailed command structure of those allegedly responsible.

Those are curious documents, when hon. Members remember American assurances in the wake of the bombing of La Belle discotheque in Germany and the retaliatory bombing of civilian targets in Libya, that the Government of the United States would produce what they claimed to be incontrovertible evidence of Libyan involvement—evidence which, 11 years later, has still to be produced.

I add in parentheses that the Minister of State knows from the records that I visited Scotland Yard in September and that I have an answer, after my long, long interview with Assistant Commissioner David Veness, that an inquiry is going on into the dreadful case of WPC Yvonne Fletcher. The Home Office has not yet reported on that.

The attack on La Belle discotheque and stark threats by senior American figures after the issue of the warrants "to hand those guys over—or else" effectively guaranteed a negative response from the Libyan Government.

Over the six years, serious objective doubts have repeatedly surfaced about the case. No one doubts the honesty, integrity and professionalism of the hundreds of men and women of the Scottish police forces, led by the Dumfries and Galloway police, but many, including some highly qualified professional, legal and diplomatic figures, have posed serious questions about the involvement of US and intelligence services, which remain unanswered.

For the clarification and information of the House, I should like to put on record some important questions of which I have not given notice because I thought that the debate would begin at 2.30 pm. Nevertheless, I should like to put them on record so that, at their convenience, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Crown Office can address them.

First, why have the authorities denied the existence of an unmarked white helicopter despite numerous reported sightings of it over the first several hours and days after Lockerbie with armed crew members warning even search and rescue personnel to leave certain areas? Not only do I know of that from various sources, but I should inform my hon. Friend the Minister that my intent interest in Lockerbie began on new year's eve 1988. The Lothian and Strathclyde police—the police who serve my constituency and particularly the Strathclyde police in your constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the city of Glasgow—had the traumatic job of clearing up the wreckage and retrieving the bodies from that great airliner.

Secondly, why was no action taken in respect of American officers removing a case from the wreckage, without the knowledge or consent of Dumfries and Galloway police, and then returning it empty?

Thirdly, why were officers of the Federal Bureau of Investigation allowed to travel to Jordan and interview Marwhan Kreesat, a known bomb maker, who was arrested and then mysteriously released in Germany in October or November 1988, without either German or Scottish officers being present?

Fourthly, why did the Foreign Secretary say that there is no way in which a case could be heard outside Scotland under Scots law and why does he rely exclusively on the Lord Advocate's office?

It may be within recollection of the House that during the most recent Adjournment debate on Lockerbie—I fear that this is the 13th such debate—I was told by the Minister of State, Scottish Office, that it would be quite impossible to open the evidence to sundry third parties. The sundry third parties were a reference to my request that the evidence should be examined either by Judge David Edward QC, the distinguished Scottish judge at The Hague, or by one of the Lords of Appeal in Ordinary—Lord Hope and Lord Clyde. I do not fancy that either Lord Hope or Lord Clyde would be enchanted at being referred to as "sundry third parties". One would like someone to look at the evidence that the Crown Office claims to have.

Fifthly, why does the Prime Minister dismiss as irrelevant a question that I asked regarding supervisory special agent James T. Thurman, discredited head of the FBI explosives laboratory? There is a general opinion that Thurman was crucial to the American side of the Lockerbie investigation; if he was not, it should be spelt out because, certainly in the public print, Thurman was greatly relied on.

Sixthly, why did my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary state in reply to my question:

"It would not be possible . . . to mount a prosecution without the co-operation of the US authorities, who hold part of the evidence."?—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1997; Vol. 299, c. 701.]

From that follows another question: why do the US authorities hold that so-called vital evidence? Has it been made available to the Scottish police, and why do they not hold it?

Why, despite a categorical undertaking to the UK relatives by the former leader of the Labour party, Neil Kinnock, that a Labour Government would hold an independent inquiry into the Lockerbie bombing, has my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister not instructed the holding of just such an inquiry? That is a matter of

undertaking. In opposition, Neil Kinnock made it absolutely crystal clear that, come a Labour Government, there would be a public inquiry. We ought to be told at some stage why that is now not possible.

Why has the Secretary of State for Scotland not extended the courtesy of a reply to a written communication from the United Kingdom relatives in respect of alleged remarks made during a lobby dinner? I do not want to go into the details of what was or was not said, but it should be clarified for the sake of the relatives. I ask that the Foreign Office should communicate with the Scottish Office and that the Secretary of State for Scotland should reply to the relatives.

Why, given a new Government, do we appear to be subservient to American control of the investigation, evidence and any possible trial? I fear that that is the impression being given.

Why, in his reply to my question last month, did the Prime Minister state:

"but it is important that nothing is done which undermines the perception and the fact of the integrity of the Scottish judicial process. That will be felt very strongly by people in Scotland"?—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1997; Vol. 299, c. 713.]

Is the Prime Minister aware of a telephone poll conducted by Teletext in the Scottish Television area last weekend, in which the replies agreed with both President Mandela and the UK relatives that the two suspects should be tried in a neutral country? Is the Prime Minister aware of a deep sense of frustration in many sectors of Scottish society that the impasse continues and that compromise seems to be an unknown word?

I pay tribute to several people who have been greatly helpful. In this whole saga, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), with whom I disagree profoundly on Europe and many other matters, has crossed a political divide in the realisation that the horror and scale of the matter must not be affected by party political position.

I pay tribute to the UK relatives' spokesman, Dr. Jim Swire, who, along with the secretary, Pamela Dix, Rev. John Mosey, Martin Cadman and many others, has pursued day in and day out the inalienable demands of truth and justice. I pay tribute to the memory of the late Alan Frankovitch, who did so much through film and writing to expose the truth, and to the work of his close colleague, David Ben-Areah, who continued the work started by Alan Frankovitch.

I commend both the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister for their decisions to meet the UK relatives—especially my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. It seems inexplicable that neither of the two previous holders of that high office saw fit to extend such an invitation.

I respectfully repeat a comment recently made by one of the relatives:

"there are none so blind as they who will not see—none so deaf as those who will not hear".

If we do not hear the demands of the relatives and if we do not act to break the frustrating impasse, we betray their trust, the trust of the people of Scotland and, most important, the memories and souls of those who died. I hope that there will be a sympathetic reply to the debate. I thank the Minister, whose schedule has probably been disturbed yet again, for answering a debate on this sad, complex, difficult and immensely important subject.

2.23 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): I wish to assure my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) that my attendance at the Dispatch Box today is no inconvenience. Indeed, from our conversations, he knows that I attach great importance to the need to pursue the issue with vigour. I thank my hon. Friend for setting out, with his usual vigour and courtesy, the important issues related to Lockerbie, on which he and the House require a clear view from the Government.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend for providing me with a copy of the paper prepared for him by the distinguished professor of Scots law, Robert Black, on the subject of third-country trial. I also am not a lawyer, but I will attempt to deal partially with some of the issues raised. In one sense, this is not an appropriate forum for me to examine that paper point by point, because of my lack of ability to go into detail. I assure my hon. Friend that the paper is being considered by my colleagues in the Crown Office who are responsible for the prosecution, and they will respond in detail. They are much more competent than I am to do so.

Mr. Dalyell: Will the paper also be considered by the Foreign Office lawyers, because some of us are desperate to have a second opinion on the Crown Office view?

Mr. Lloyd: The lawyers in the Foreign Office are, of course, actively engaged in the debate. My hon. Friend will know that, during the recent consideration of the location of the Lockerbie trial by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Foreign Office lawyers were present, together with the Lord Advocate. However, I do not wish to pretend to my hon. Friend that there is some mechanism under which the Foreign Office would even seek to interpose itself above the Lord Advocate in his legitimate and undeniable constitutional role as the legal authority in Scotland.

Mr. Dalyell: I do not name civil servants in the House, but two civil servants in the Crown Office who have given key advice have been there for a long time, and I understand that both have been honoured by the American Administration. That causes some of us to raise our eyebrows. All I am asking is that either the distinguished lawyers in the Foreign Office, or the Lords of Appeal in Ordinary, or Judge David Edwards QC, consider the issue. After all, the issue involves the British national interest, apart from anything else.

Mr. Lloyd: There is no distance between us on the fact that this matter is of considerable national interest. Perhaps the best way to respond to my hon. Friend is to say that, since the Government came into office six months ago, and since I first responded to an Adjournment debate prompted by my hon. Friend, I—and every relevant member of the Foreign Office team and the Scottish Office and of the Scottish legal system—have spent much time looking at the evidence. I make no criticism of the time we have spent, because it was right and proper that we should do so.

I emphasise that we approached the issue with no fixed agenda or preconceived views, except a wish to examine the evidence afresh. The Lockerbie bombing is, rightly,

[Mr. Lloyd]

of fundamental importance, not only in terms of my hon. Friend's concerns and the interests of the families involved—desperately important though those are—but because the issue affects the whole nation and its role in the world. We know that we are considering global issues, and I emphasise that we came to the issue with real determination to look at it afresh.

The Lord Advocate has gone through the evidence, and has shared it with members of the Foreign Office. As my hon. Friend knows, the Lord Advocate is firmly of the view that the evidence against the two accused Libyans justified the legal proceedings taken against them.

Mr. Dalyell: The Lord Advocate was a very controversial counsel in the original and highly controversial fatal accident inquiry. And is it known to the Foreign Office that senior officials of the Crown Office have had honours from the United States Government?

Mr. Lloyd: I am not in a position to comment on that. I must honestly tell my hon. Friend that the Lord Advocate is not only a lawyer of considerable expertise but somebody who, in the light both of his background and of the care and patience with which he has reviewed the present situation, should not in drawing the same conclusions as his predecessors be accused of initial bias. He was aware of the pressure that existed; indeed, he is the third Lord Advocate to examine the evidence afresh, and each one has a responsibility not only to himself—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Ms Bridget Prentice.]*

Mr. Lloyd: I was saying that the Lord Advocate, both because of his background and professional training, and because of the office that he holds, made it his business to come to the issue anew. I understand what my hon. Friend says about his previous role, but there was a gap of some years after his initial involvement—a distance not only of time but of separation of responsibilities.

It is hardly for me to say this, but I believe that, personally, the Lord Advocate is a man not only of considerable talent but of rectitude. I hope that my hon. Friend will accept that he approached the task with precisely the kind of interest and vigour that my hon. Friend would wish, and came to the conclusion, as others had done before, that the evidence justified the legal proceedings against the accused.

I repeat to my hon. Friend that the authorities' only interest is in ensuring that we identify and prosecute the perpetrators of that terrible act of murder. I have no hidden agenda, and the Foreign Secretary has none, either. We fully accept the view of the men and women who have diligently and tirelessly worked on the case—indeed, my hon. Friend paid tribute to them.

We believe that the evidence firmly supports the case against the accused. Inevitably, many alternative theories have been propounded by those who, unlike the Lord Advocate, have not had access to the evidence—but none of those stands up to scrutiny.

For example, it is worth noting that one of the theories spread abroad concerns the evidence of Lester Knox Coleman, whose account formed a large part of the television film, "The Maltese Double Cross". I think that my hon. Friend knows that Mr. Coleman has now confessed to an American court that his story was false. That is just one example of the inevitable speculation that has surrounded the case.

I use the word "inevitable" because I understand that, for those who seek the truth, the fact that the evidence will not be made available until there is a trial means that their knowledge of what is there is restricted. It also means that other theories will be suggested, and those are bound to be examined.

My starting point is that the Government come afresh to the issue, and are satisfied both that the evidence justifies the criminal charges brought against the two accused, and that the place to test that evidence is in a court of law.

Mr. Dalyell: I do not know whether the Minister will remember this, but the late Alan Frankovitch, the film maker, said that he was always extremely careful about Lester Coleman, who was peripheral, not central, to the film.

Mr. Lloyd: My hon. Friend makes the point for himself. There is no doubt that Mr. Coleman has now come out with a version of events different from that which he held firmly before.

The way to put an end to such speculation is to bring the matter to trial, and that is what the Government seek to do. I think that my hon. Friend will accept the fact that, since the general election, the new Government have come to the issue with a vigour that was not there before. He referred to the fact that not only the Foreign Secretary but the Prime Minister will meet the relatives; that is a courtesy that it is proper to extend to them. This offer to meet is not a guarantee to take the issue on to a different plane, because we believe that we must make sure that we bring the accused to trial.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow began by talking about the role of President Mandela, and he will have noted that the Prime Minister had an exchange of views on Lockerbie with President Mandela during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary covered the same ground with the South African Foreign Minister. As my hon. Friend said, President Mandela is an exceptional statesman, whose views are welcomed by the whole world, and he shares our desire to make progress in many areas, particularly Lockerbie.

President Mandela offered his thoughts to the Prime Minister on a third-country trial, but my right hon. Friend explained for our part why a trial by jury in Scotland would be fair and impartial. We explained the formidable obstacles to a third-country trial, and how instead we should make progress through inviting international observers to a trial in Scotland. We will pursue that with vigour.

Our position has always been that there should be a trial in Scotland or the United States. President Mandela has not sought to mediate, and he is fully aware of the great importance we attach to Lockerbie and our views on how we must proceed. During his last visit to Libya,

he emphasised the importance of respecting the United Nations. The Government believe that the Libyans should respect the UN by complying with the UN Security Council resolutions, which, among other things, insist upon a trial in Scotland or the US.

We have had discussions with many other leaders on the subject of Lockerbie in recent weeks. We have asked those who may have influence with the Libyan Government to seek to convince Libya that it should submit the accused to a fair and transparent trial in Scotland. Libya, for its part, has exerted great efforts in trying to have the sanctions against it eased.

We have made it clear, as we will do again today in a meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York, that we cannot countenance such a move until Libya meets the requirements of the Security Council resolutions. But we have made it equally clear that, when Libya does comply, we will support the suspension of sanctions. There is no hidden agenda—we want the issue to be resolved as much as anyone.

What Libya has done over the past six years is to prevaricate and put up smokescreens to disguise why it has failed to comply precisely with the requirements of the Security Council resolutions. In 1993, Libya said that it was satisfied with the assurances it had been given over the fairness of a trial in Scotland. It said that it could not force the suspects to present themselves for trial in Scotland, but it would urge them to do so. Nothing happened. Now it is alleged that the suspects would not receive a fair trial in Scotland. We think that that is absolutely preposterous.

We are asked to believe that Libya would hand the accused over for a trial in another country. But if it is unable to force the suspects to attend a trial in Scotland because of the absence of an extradition treaty, why should it be any more able to deliver them for trial in another country? My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow made the point that the Libyans have said that there was no obstacle to the accused appearing in a third country. It is very hard to hear that a trial by Scottish judges under Scottish jurisdiction outside Scotland would be acceptable, while the same process with the added safeguard of an independent Scots jury in Scotland would be such a bad thing.

Mr. Dalyell: What on earth, then, is the objection to an incoming Labour Government offering to meet those people and talk to them, to find out face to face exactly what their position is? Is it not high time that we talked to them?

Mr. Lloyd: We have made it clear that we would welcome independent observers from the Arab League, the Organisation of African Unity and the United Nations if they came to Scotland to discuss the trial process and satisfy themselves that a Scottish trial would be conducted impartially, independently and fairly. We believe that that is the way forward.

That invitation has been accepted by the United Nations, and we look forward to pursuing precisely the question of the independence and acceptability of a Scottish trial with those who are themselves independent. It is important for us not to give the false impression that we can accept some form of negotiation with those who claim to represent those accused of crimes of the utmost seriousness in this country.

Propounding his own views and those of Professor Black, my hon. Friend asked why only the Lord Advocate—or at least the Scottish legal establishment—took the view that there was a difficulty about a third-country trial. I refer him to the conclusions of Professor M. Cherif Bassaouni of the international human rights institute of De Paul university, Chicago, who was the keynote speaker at a conference organised by the International Bar Association in conjunction with the Arab Lawyers Union, and who concluded that there would be insurmountable practical difficulties in establishing a trial in a third country.

The professor proposed what he called a Scottish solution, which he considered the only way forward. His agenda was very similar to that of the Scottish legal authorities.

Mr. Dalyell: I was at that conference, and a lot of other things were said. As I recollect, one of the objections was the difficulty of moving a jury. That objection, at least, I would have thought, had been met by Professor Black.

Mr. Lloyd: A jury is there not only to protect the rights of a defendant but to protect the Crown and the wider public interest; it is there precisely because it is not the professional legal officers, of whom my hon. Friend complains, who are able to dictate the pace and the conclusions of the trial process; the jury establishes some independence. I feel strongly—this is a personal view—that the jury system may not be perfect, but it is the best of all the systems devised in legal circles.

I would be most reluctant to go down the road that my hon. Friend suggests. He mentioned Diplock courts in Northern Ireland, where juries were dispensed with; they were justified by the then Government on the basis that there was a severe risk of intimidation of witnesses. Neither he nor I would want to pretend that there would be witness intimidation in a trial in Scotland, were the accused to appear there. I know that he would accept that.

Perhaps I am venturing beyond my legal competence, but, in response to my hon. Friend's point that any appeal of a third-country trial would take place in Scotland, I can only reply that the same appeal structure would apply to a trial conducted in Scotland. I can refer him to instances when judges in both England and Scotland have discharged juries—as, recently, in the case of those accused of IRA activities—on the basis that a trial would have been prejudiced by the publicity.

There are safeguards in the Scottish and the general British legal systems for a mistrial such as might take place under those circumstances. We hold to the view that a jury trial is acceptable, offers protection for all sides, and would not easily take place outside the confines of the Scottish system.

Those matters, however, are not the real issue. The real point is that Libya wilfully refuses to make the suspects available for trial, and shelters behind the alleged views of the two accused. Few serious cases would ever be brought to trial if the accused were allowed to decide whether or where the case should come to court.

[Mr. Lloyd]

The Libyans suggest that publicity in Britain would prejudice that trial. I have already said that we do not accept that. We are proud of our judicial system and the legal safeguards that it provides for the defendant—as well, of course, as the desire to pursue the guilty. That is why we have no hesitation in inviting international observers to a trial of the suspects in Scotland.

As I have said, we have now invited the United Nations, the Arab League and the Organisation of African Unity to Scotland to see the system for themselves. We will be glad to answer their queries, and to meet any concerns that they may have. At the request of my hon. Friend, the Government's invitation to the United Nations, the Arab League and the OAU has been placed in the Library of the House. I know that he will have seen it. We are grateful to the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, for accepting that invitation.

While we will not negotiate with the Libyans, we talk with them on an on-going basis through the British interest section in Tripoli. It is always possible for them to put to us any areas of difficulty or concern that they have about a fair trial in Scotland on that basis. We would seek to answer those questions, but without accepting a priori that we feel that there is anything faulty or prejudicial about the Scottish legal system.

The worst possible outcome would be a trial that collapsed on technicalities. The truth might then never emerge, and that would be a real risk in a trial without precedent, set up by a new instrument to allow a Scottish court to sit in a third country. It cannot be right that those accused of a savage crime should dictate the form and venue of their trial.

To be honest, my hon. Friend is being slightly casual—I say that in kindness, as I do not normally accuse him of anything other than the utmost thoroughness—in suggesting that the choice of a trial anywhere in the world is comparable to the forced choice of a trial either in the United States or in Scotland, when there is a clear judicial criterion by which both those places are determined.

It is simply not the same to say that the accused ought to have unlimited choice as to where the trial should take place. That would set a precedent for the trial of other suspected terrorists accused of killing innocent people both here in the United Kingdom and more generally, and the horrific nature of such a crime means that we must in the end insist on a trial in one of the two places where there is a clear judicial locus.

Mr. Dalyell: Casual or not, the difficulty is that we will whistle in the wind. My hon. Friend talks about "in the end". When is there going to be an end? This has gone on for nine long years. Is it to go on for another nine, beyond the life of this and many other Governments? When will it be brought to an end? The difficulties with the Germans were brought to an end at least five years after 1945.

Mr. Lloyd: Of course, in the end I, like everyone else, recognise the terrible frustration, particularly of those most directly concerned—

Mr. Dalyell: The relatives.

Mr. Lloyd: Of course. They are the ones most directly concerned. I also recognise the frustration felt by everyone else on the issue.

We are pursuing this matter with real vigour. That is why we have issued the invitations to the world community and why we are asking it to involve itself in a way that we have not done previously. It is why we are asking that the United Nations Security Council resolutions be applied. They are not the resolutions of the United States—suspicious as my hon. Friend is of the United States—or even of Britain, but resolutions put forward by the United Nations as a community of the world.

It is those resolutions that we insist should be complied with. That is why we are inviting the world community to join us in that venture. That is the vigour that we want to apply to the present debate, because we also want to bring the matter to an end. The only way that we can put an end to the speculation and pain is by pursuing the matter in that way. We will continue to push that as hard as we can.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend says that I am suspicious of the United States. I was once a member of the executive of the British American parliamentary group, and would consider myself in many ways friendly to the United States, but I am extremely suspicious of them on this because they have been brutally critical of their forensic scientist, James Thurman. Many of the doubts about this whole issue are coming out of the United States.

Mr. Lloyd: I remind my hon. Friend that the then Lord Advocate wrote to him in October 1995 explaining that the proof of the Lockerbie case did not depend on the evidence of Mr. Thurman. The allegations against him were made by a former colleague, Dr. Frederick Whitehurst, and related to criminal investigations other than Lockerbie. It was alleged that he had committed perjury, obstructed the course of justice and fabricated evidence.

The allegations were investigated, and found to have no validity. A report published by the inspector general found that there was no evidence to support them. The report criticised lapses in Mr. Thurman's supervisory procedures, in recognition of which he was reassigned to other duties. He was not dismissed, as has been widely reported, although Dr. Whitehurst was dismissed from his post. Mr. Thurman's centrality to the case is not what my hon. Friend may believe it to be.

We believe that the role of the United States in the investigation to date, and in any future prosecution, has been, and will continue to be, one of the fullest co-operation. We have shared the evidence that has been collected with them, and their co-operation has, in turn, earned our deep gratitude, just as the work of the Scottish investigators has earned American praise. Any prosecution will entail further co-operation. There is no disagreement between us that the prosecution should proceed. We intend to continue to act in the same spirit of consultation and co-operation that has characterised the pursuit of the case so far.

In this instance, let me assure my hon. Friend that there is no question of United States dominance of the process or of the evidence. The Lord Advocate's decision to

continue the prosecution was made on the basis of the evidence presented to him. It is in our national interest, not that of anyone else. It is part of our duty to those who died at Lockerbie and to their relatives that we proceed on that basis. The question of the dominance of one country over another in this case is peripheral, a non-starter. It is Britain's interest that determines the way we act.

My hon. Friend raised several other issues, some of which were very technical. I have taken notes of what he raised. He knows that others will have taken more careful notes, including the *Official Report*. I will ensure that those issues are raised elsewhere, and, as far as it is in my power, I undertake that he will receive a reply from me or, where more appropriate, from others.

I do not want to raise any expectation in my hon. Friend that the answers he gets will take some of his points further, because one or two of them are matters that are for others to answer. I cannot at this stage, for example, go beyond referring him to what the Prime Minister said to him in the Commons. His remarks were self-evident. I do not suggest that there is anything further to be said.

Mr. Dalyell: My hon. Friend has been extremely patient with me in answering questions but having listened to all this, forgive me if I say in an exasperated way—on behalf, I think, of the relatives and certainly of sections of British industry and exporters and of quite a number of other people—where on earth do the Government see this ending? This is a situation without an end in sight. There is no light at the end of the tunnel. Are we to go on and on and on with such relations with one of the states of north Africa that is not overcome by the Islamic problems that afflict Algeria? Is there any hope of getting them on to a correct basis? It is all so pessimistic. I really am dismayed.

Mr. Lloyd: I must say clearly and unambiguously to my hon. Friend that the mass murder of British citizens and many others could never allow us to make commercial considerations our primary national self-interest. Our national interest must be to pursue the matter until we draw legitimate conclusions about the guilt or otherwise of those accused. We owe that to those who died, and to their relatives.

My hon. Friend's plea on behalf of those relatives is creditable, because I readily understand their frustration. The problem can be resolved by the international community exerting pressure on Libya, and when the Libyan Government accept the need to comply with the Security Council resolutions. I urge Colonel Gaddafi and those in the Libyan regime who want to establish a normal relationship with the rest of the world to ensure that they comply. That would cut through all the speculation. I accept that that will not take away the pain and the grief, but it will allow us to move on to the trial that should take place to establish guilt or innocence.

Although we can never draw a line under the matter, at least we can put an end to the frustrating confusion that I share not only with my hon. Friend but with the relatives who are here today, who have had to bear that burden for such a long time.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 10 November 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Millennium Projects

1. **Mr. Pike:** What the legacy of the millennium projects will be in London and the regions. [13426]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): During its lifetime, the Millennium Commission will spend more than £2 billion on projects throughout the United Kingdom, covering five key themes: investing in education; promoting science and technology; revitalising cities; supporting communities; and encouraging environmental sustainability. It will thus prove of lasting benefit to the whole nation.

Mr. Pike: The forest of Burnley scheme has overwhelming support in my constituency, but it could not have gone ahead without millennium funding. Will not such schemes change the country positively for the forthcoming millennium?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. The forest of Burnley scheme has received a £1.7 million grant from the Millennium Commission. It will create 500 hectares of new woodland and engage an arts and education programme linked to the woodland work.

I should like to add that I am delighted that, later this afternoon, my hon. Friend the Minister without Portfolio will be answering questions about the millennium dome. I remind the House how important it was that I suggested four months ago that he should take over direct responsibility for the millennium experience. It would have been improper for me, as chairman of the Millennium Commission, which provides a major proportion of the funding, to be in charge of the company that received the money.

Mr. Fabricant: The Secretary of State will be aware that one project being undertaken throughout London, as well as at Longdon in my constituency, is the restoration of church bells. Is he aware of the difficulty being experienced throughout the London area and in other parts of the United Kingdom? English Heritage is insisting that church bell frames should also be maintained, even though 200 or 300-year-old frames are often not suitable for the restoration of existing bells. The Secretary of State should be aware of that problem, which is causing a logjam, as people cannot easily get up to belfries to see the frames—after all, the object of the exercise is the heritage of bell ringing and the bells themselves.

Mr. Smith: I am aware of the issue. We need to ensure that the frames are robust enough and that heritage interests are taken fully into account. I shall discuss the matter with English Heritage.

Rev. Martin Smyth: I thank the Secretary of State for the money that has already been allocated to Northern Ireland projects. Will he reconsider the problem of shortfall in the satellite for the sports academy, which is so vital to our heritage? We have been boxing above our weight over the years, as a small community. It would be worse if we did not have that facility to match the others.

Mr. Smith: I am well aware of the issue. My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport will have a word or two to say about the British academy of sport later. We hope to make some specific announcements in a few days.

Tourism (Minimum Wage)

2. **Mr. Clappison:** What representations he has received on the impact of the introduction of a minimum wage in the tourist industry. [13427]

The Minister for Film and Tourism (Mr. Tom Clarke): I have received representations from a number of leading figures in the tourism and hospitality industry, and have taken careful note of the views expressed.

Mr. Clappison: Has the Minister seen the evidence presented to the Low Pay Commission by the British Hospitality Association, which represents 25,000 establishments in the hotel and catering industry, some 78 per cent. of which think that the introduction of a national minimum wage without regional variations will have a particularly serious effect on jobs and businesses in rural and coastal areas? Does the Minister agree with the association's view that the least that should be done to help those businesses is for benefits in kind to be taken into account in assessing compliance with the minimum wage?

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman should give the Government credit for honouring their election pledges: first, to commit themselves to a minimum wage; secondly, to set up the Low Pay Commission; and, thirdly, to ensure that the commission recognised the issues faced by the tourism industry. The hon. Gentleman referred specifically to the British Hospitality Association. I remind him of the views of the president of that association, Garry Hawkes. Referring to a survey showing that 84 per cent. of hospitality staff and 65 per cent. of their employers supported a statutory minimum wage, he said:

"this research shows there is a broad acceptance of the minimum wage issue now. This industry is not against it, but employers want it to be set at a realistic level".

That is entirely the Government's intention.

Mr. Bayley: Does the Minister recall the words of Sir Winston Churchill? He said that a minimum wage was needed because, otherwise, the good employer would be driven out of business by the bad, and the bad employer would be driven out of business by the worst. I have consulted tourism employers in my constituency who say that they have no problem with the principle of a minimum wage, although they believe that the level at which that wage is set is important. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that a wide range of voices in the tourism industry will be consulted before a final decision is made?

Mr. Clarke: That process is already going on. I agree with my hon. Friend, who rightly referred to Winston Churchill. One of the problems about the Conservative party is that it not only does not know where it is going—it does not know where it is coming from. The minimum wage has been supported by Winston Churchill, by Harold Macmillan, by the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), and, much more important, by people such as John Scott, the managing director of the Frere Jacques restaurant in Kingston, Surrey, who said:

"this is not about altruism. It makes sound business sense to pay high wages because I get good-quality, highly motivated people."

That is the Government's intention as well.

Mr. Spring: What does the right hon. Gentleman think will be the impact of the European Commission's social chapter proposal, which we cannot now veto, to impose works councils on small and medium-sized businesses? Does he not recognise that that, coupled with the introduction of the minimum wage, will destroy the viability of our tourism industry, destroy jobs now and destroy the ability of this important industry to create jobs in future?

Mr. Clarke: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post and look forward to further exchanges. I hope that, on future occasions, he will get his facts right. He does not speak for the industry when he deplores the social chapter, and he does not speak for the British people either. The Labour party's policies were endorsed by the British people and we intend to implement them. We do so in the knowledge that we are attempting to ensure proper job motivation, proper careers, especially for young people, and the removal of sweatshop conditions that the industry itself deplores. I recommend the hon. Gentleman to make some of the visits that I have made over the past six months in every part of the country. He will hear from people such as Jerry Walden, who wrote just a few weeks ago from the New Commercial inn in Axminster, Devon. He said—his views are important—

"the long-term future of our industry is dependent on a better paid, better cared for, better trained and more professional workforce".

That is what we intend to introduce.

Mr. Grocott: Having heard numerous representations from the Opposition on the minimum wage, has my right hon. Friend formed the impression, as I have, that it is a matter of supreme indifference to them whether people are earning £1.50 an hour, £1 an hour or even less? Although we regret the fact that the Opposition are taking such a time to learn basic, decent standards of industrial relations, does my right hon. Friend share my pleasure that, even six months after the election, they still have not begun to learn some of the reasons why they were beaten?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The tourism, hospitality and leisure industry employs 1.7 million people. It has a great future, but not one based on exploitation, poor wages or lack of training. That is one of the many reasons why the Conservatives are in opposition and we are in government.

Museums (Minimum Wage)

3. **Mr. Forth:** What representations he has received on the impact of a minimum wage on employment in the nation's museums. [13428]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Mark Fisher): No direct representations have been made to me, but I am aware that a number of organisations that represent museum interests have submitted written evidence to the Low Pay Commission in response to its invitation.

Mr. Forth: Will the Minister be making any representations to the commission in order to safeguard the interests of the museums which, for the time being, are under his care? If so, what will he say? Is he concerned about the possibility that the museums might have to lose valuable staff if a minimum wage were wrong-headedly set at too high a level? Is that one of the things that he will say?

Mr. Fisher: No. I have met the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Museums Association and seen their submissions to the Low Pay Commission. They have discussed the issues and are much more positive about the proposals than the right hon. Gentleman appears to be.

Mr. Healey: Does my hon. Friend recognise that tourism has a track record of low pay, which results in high staff turnover and low investment in training? Does he further recall the report that was commissioned and published by the previous Administration showing that 45 per cent. of full-time tourism staff—

Madam Speaker: Order. I regret to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but his remarks relate to the earlier question. We have moved on and are now dealing with the nation's museums. The hon. Gentleman's question must relate to the substantive question on the Order Paper.

Mr. Healey: The museum industry is a crucial part of the tourism industry—

Madam Speaker: Order. Had the hon. Gentleman mentioned museums in the earlier part of his question, it would have been acceptable. Presumably, he is talking about the staff in museums.

Mr. Healey: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I omitted to mention that in the earlier part of my question.

Does my hon. Friend recall the survey commissioned by the previous Administration covering tourism staff, including museum staff, which showed that 45 per cent. of full-time staff in the sector had received no training

since they left education, and that 74 per cent. of part-timers were in the same position? Does he agree, therefore, that the national minimum wage offers the museum sector of the tourism industry the chance finally to break the vicious cycle of recruitment problems, skill shortages, low pay and poor image?

Mr. Fisher: I think my hon. Friend makes his point extremely well and I agree with him.

Mr. Maude: I am sorry the Minister's answers are not to be followed by a countermanding from the Secretary of State, who seems to be in the habit of saying that the Minister has it wrong whenever the hon. Gentleman opens his mouth in public.

I hope that the Minister will reconsider the effect of a national minimum wage on the enthusiasts who are the lifeblood of many small local museums, many of whom work for less than £2 an hour, which is really pocket money. Is he saying that in future, under a caring Labour Government, such people must work for nothing—if they work at all?

Mr. Fisher: No. The right hon. Gentleman probably refers to the Association of Independent Museums. I have received representations from Mr. Jonathan Bryant and others in that association. It is quite right that they should make those representations—and they have done so—to the Low Pay Commission. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Low Pay Commission is required to take into account the social as well as the economic impact of the report.

Television Licence

4. **Mr. Evans:** What representations he has received concerning the television licence. [13430]

Mr. Chris Smith: We have received nearly 500 letters from hon. Members and members of the public about the television licence. In addition, there have been 12 questions on the subject from hon. Members. The majority of those representations have been about television licence fees and licensing requirements for specific individuals or groups.

Mr. Evans: I am grateful for that reply. Since pensioners are still reeling from the news that they will get no support with their energy bills as regards the wind chill factor, does the Secretary of State agree with the early-day motion tabled by some of his colleagues just three years ago—some of whom are now Ministers—urging the Government to take urgent action to facilitate free television licences for pensioners? Is it not the case that Labour Members support pensioners when in opposition but betray their trust when in government?

Mr. Smith: It is a bit rich for Conservative Members to talk about doing down pensioners. I received a letter from the hon. Gentleman on 6 July about the BBC licence fee, in the course of which he mis-spelt the word "licence" not once but four times. That, I suppose, is the result of 18 years of Tory education policy. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer."] The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is that, if we made free licences available to all pensioner-only households, it would cost £465 million, which would mean an increase in the licence fee for everyone else of £30 a year. We are not prepared to do that.

Mr. Rowlands: Despite some useful changes in the regulations governing television licence fees for elderly people, I must tell my right hon. Friend that there are a huge number of anomalies in the scheme. If nothing else, will he look at those anomalies, which need to be addressed because they are causing great resentment and irritation?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend makes a much better point than the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans). There are indeed serious anomalies in the system at the moment. We shall certainly wish to look at that, in conjunction with the general review of the licence fee in a few years' time, to which we are committed. We were committed to that review by the previous Government and we shall be following it through.

Mr. Gale: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm the information that was given to me by his Minister for Arts to the effect that his party has no plans whatever to consider concessionary television licences—having given the impression in opposition that they would—until at least 2002? Is he not letting pensioners down flat?

Mr. Smith: No, because we made no commitment whatever on concessionary licences before the election.

Athletics

5. **Mr. Ennis:** What plans he has to help improve the quality of training for British athletes. [13431]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): We are committed to improving the quality of training both through the development of a British academy of sport, which will provide our athletes with the best training facilities possible, and the English Sports Council's world-class performance programme, which provides lottery support to our elite athletes.

Mr. Ennis: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. There is a great deal of anticipation about the establishment of a British academy of sport. When can we expect an announcement from him about the location and establishment of that facility?

Mr. Banks: There will be an announcement on Friday.

Mr. Maude: Bearing in mind recent U-turns on the sporting front, will the Minister confirm the report in yesterday's papers that cricket, rugby and football will be included in the British academy of sport? In the light of recent events, can he tell the House whether the leading lights of those sporting organisations were financial contributors to the Labour party?

Mr. Banks: Those sports were never going to be excluded. There has been considerable misunderstanding over the question. *[Interruption.]* I shall tell the House why. The concept was very good; unfortunately, the design brief did not get very many points. Ministers previously said: "Yes, we are going to have an academy

of sport. Now tell us what sort of an academy we are going to have." Since the election, we have been ensuring that we know exactly what sort of academy we will have. It will mainly be directed at the Olympic sports and at those for which there are national and world championships.

There has never been any question of the team sports, such as football, rugby and cricket, being excluded, but their needs are so particular that they should have separate academies. We are working actively to achieve that. The academy for sport and its skills in sports medicine and science will be available to all sports, including the team sports. If the right hon. Gentleman can contain himself a little longer—I know the process has been drawn out, but the wait is worth it because the decision is undoubtedly the most important that we face in British sport—the announcement will be made on Friday.

Mr. Bercow: Labour party funding?

Mr. Banks: As far as I am aware, there is no question of Labour party funding—more's the pity.

Children's Radio

6. **Mr. Woolas:** What representations he has received on proposals for a children's radio channel; and if he will make a statement. [13432]

Mr. Fisher: We have received representations from nine organisations and individuals in support of the award of an independent national radio licence for the provision of a children's radio service.

Mr. Woolas: I thank the Minister for that answer and for the reply that I received earlier by letter. Do the Government recognise the many benefits, both educational and in general, that children receive from radio broadcasting for them?

Mr. Fisher: Having been brought up on "Children's Hour", Uncle Mac and "Dick Barton, Special Agent", I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend that high-quality broadcasting, both radio and television, is important for children. It plays a major part in education, widens a child's horizons and sparks a child's imagination. Above all, it is fun.

Mr. Tredinnick: Is the Minister aware that the BBC's children's television programme budget has been cut by £5 million since last year? Does he worry about the increased number of cartoons shown on television? Has not the time come for him to examine that issue as well as the question of a children's radio station?

Mr. Fisher: The BBC charter requires the BBC to produce a large amount of high-quality, original programming and last year it produced 1,500 hours of children's programming of very high quality. I presume that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Broadcasting Standards Council's report. Both he and I need to study that report in some detail, because some of the original headlines were not borne out by the detail of the report. Indeed, in the *Evening Standard* today, the BBC puts a robust case and points out that only one cartoon show is on at prime time each day this week, with none at all on Wednesday.

Sport (Disabled People)

7. **Mr. Robathan:** What assistance his Department is giving to sport for disabled people. [13433]

Mr. Banks: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is aware that I take a close personal interest in that subject. We are determined to promote sport for people with disabilities. It is our aim to maximise opportunity for all people, no matter what their ability.

For the year 1997-98, the English Sports Council is providing disabled sports organisations with just under £590,000. That includes £40,000 to the British Deaf Sports Council, £195,000 to Disability Sport England and £111,500 to the English Sports Association for People with Learning Disabilities. Some £1.3 million also goes to our elite athletes with disabilities.

Mr. Robathan: I am sure that the whole House supports that work. However, should not the Minister listen to what disabled people say themselves? Perhaps he should read the letter from the chairman of the British Paraplegic Shooting Association, backed up by the chief executive of the British Olympic Association, which pleaded with the Home Secretary to allow disabled sportsmen and sportswomen in wheelchairs to continue with their sport of firing pistols. The Minister should listen to those people and not dictate what they should do.

Mr. Banks: I do, indeed, listen, and since I became Minister for Sport, I have opened the special Olympic games at Portsmouth, the world blind sailing championships at Weymouth and the British disabled water-skiing facility at Heron lake. I have attended disabled rugby, volleyball, cricket, football, skiing and archery. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is making the point that I should listen to sportsmen and sportswomen with disabilities, and I have been listening to a particularly large number of them.

The Government's policy on shooting is absolutely clear. When we come to the Olympic and Commonwealth games, some arrangements will have to be made for those sports to be included, but I am afraid that Government policy cannot be overwhelmed by the interests of sportsmen and women.

Radio Licences

8. **Mr. Vaz:** What proposals he has to increase the number of radio licences. [13434]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Radio Authority has statutory responsibility for the advertising, award and regulation of all independent radio licences acting within the terms of the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996. Since its creation, the authority has almost doubled the number of independent radio licences issued. The authority has a continuing forward programme for the advertisement and award of new licences.

Mr. Vaz: Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the Radio Authority on the way in which

it has handled its difficult task of awarding licences? Does he agree that, once the frequencies become available, they must be publicised as widely as possible to allow as many community groups as possible the opportunity to bid, rather than just leaving it to the big guns who know when the information will be published?

Mr. Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend on both counts. The authority takes steps to advertise in local newspapers, to contact local authorities and to write to all hon. Members in the area affected by a forthcoming franchise. I hope that the authority will see what more it can do, but it is mindful of its responsibilities.

Mr. Yeo: In view of Labour's commitment to open government, does the Secretary of State agree that it would be helpful to all concerned if any future applicant for a radio licence were required to state in public at the time of the application whether he was a financial donor of the Labour party?

Mr. Smith: I am not sure that I would make any such requirement specific to any political party.

Tourism (Welfare-to-Work Programme)

9. **Mr. Hurst:** If he will make a statement on the employment opportunities the tourist industry will be able to offer under the welfare-to-work programme. [13435]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Tourism, with its enormous potential for employment generation, is well placed to play a key role in the new deal/welfare-to-work programme. Almost 50 leading employers and trade bodies in tourism, hospitality and leisure have already indicated strong interest in the programme.

Mr. Hurst: What steps are the Government taking to encourage the active participation of the industry in the welfare-to-work programme?

Mr. Clarke: The Government are preparing to take a number of steps, including a conference on 24 November, organised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and involving the Department for Education and Employment and the British Hospitality Association, to consider these matters. Almost 50 employers and trade bodies have expressed an interest in working with the Department to achieve that objective.

National Lottery

10. **Mrs. Virginia Bottomley:** What plans he has to reform the national lottery. [13436]

Mr. Chris Smith: I published my proposals to reform the lottery in the White Paper "The People's Lottery" in July. They will make the lottery work better and increase the number of people who will benefit from the good causes that it supports. Some of the proposals require legislation and I expect to introduce the lottery reform Bill before Christmas.

Mrs. Bottomley: Has the Secretary of State seen the comments from Lord Rothschild who, like others, is complaining about the increase in ministerial interference and diktat and the reduction in sums available for heritage, sport, the arts and charities? Lord Rothschild estimated that £200 million less will be available for heritage as a result of the right hon. Gentleman's proposals. Is he aware of the growing anger at his disregard for the principles of additionality and the arm's-length arrangements? Is he aware that, increasingly, his proposals are being described not as a people's lottery but as a Chancellor of the Exchequer's lottery through which Ministers' pet projects can be funded through the back pocket?

Mr. Smith: I will make three brief points in response to the right hon. Lady's six. First, we stand firmly behind the principle of additionality. In September 1994, the previous Prime Minister said:

"The money raised by the Lottery will not replace public expenditure."

If the right hon. Lady does not think that that is good enough, I would remind her of her own definition. In July 1996, she said:

"Lottery funds are not intended to substitute for funds which would have otherwise been provided by conventional public expenditure."

We agree, and there is no intention in the people's lottery proposals to do anything other than stand by those definitions of additionality.

Secondly, each of the existing distributary bodies will receive exactly the amount that they originally anticipated receiving when the lottery began: £1.8 billion during the seven-year lottery franchise. Thirdly, the right hon. Lady is ignoring the benefits that will come from the new proposals for £1 billion of additional spending on health and education-related projects, which the people of this country supported when they voted on 1 May.

Madam Speaker: Mr. Skinner.

Mr. Skinner *rose—*

Mr. Maclennan *rose—*

Madam Speaker: I called Mr. Skinner.

Mr. Skinner: The right hon. Gentleman will have to go after me. After all, he is only a little Liberal.

When the reform takes place, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the distribution of lottery money throughout the country is different from what it has been in the few years of its existence? It is well known that in the east midlands and certain counties, such as Derbyshire, the distribution has been woefully weak, and we want to ensure that in future those who participate in the lottery in our part of the world get a fair crack of the whip. If we can get rid of that dome and find some more money, so much the better.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend will know that one of our proposals is that the distributary bodies should draw up a strategic plan for the deployment of their resources; as part of that, we shall look to them to ensure a fair distribution across the whole country.

Mr. Maclennan: Bearing in mind the fact that the previous Government presided over a decline in the vote

money for the Secretary of State's Department and that he has not arrested that decline, how does he propose to deal with the revenue difficulties of many companies, such as the Gate theatre in London, and the Greenwich theatre, to which Ms Polly Toynbee drew attention today—never mind the Royal Opera house? Does he believe that his proposals for changing lottery rules will in any way deal with the decline of many companies throughout the country that have so far not been assisted by the lottery?

Mr. Smith: Yes, because the proposals in the White Paper specifically suggest that we should move away from the exclusive concentration on capital spending, on bricks and mortar, and start to give more support from lottery funds to people and activities; that will be the start of resolving some of the problems that the right hon. Gentleman identified.

Mr. Baldry: The Secretary of State will be aware that national lottery funding is to be used for the British academy of sport. Any hon. Member who listened to the Minister for Sport's reply could have drawn the reasonable inference that there was to be an announcement of the winner this Friday, but that will clearly not happen. It should be made clear that the announcement on Friday will be of the criteria by which national lottery bids could be judged.

Given that the Government announced on 21 July that a winner would be announced by September, is it not time that a grip was got on the whole project and that we had a clear timetable for the announcement of a winner for the British academy of sport? Many people have invested a lot of time, effort and energy. In the Heyfords, for example, we believe that we are a winner, and we have the support of the British Olympic community, but it is very frustrating not knowing where we stand. Can we have clear criteria and a clear timetable against which everyone can bid?

Mr. Smith: It is precisely because inadequate energy and effort were put in by the previous Government that we have had to spend all of the past six months trying to get a grip on this issue. On Friday, we will be announcing a clear set of details and a framework for the academy. There are three possible locations, which will be invited to submit final proposals within one or two weeks to accord with the framework that we will put in place on Friday, and a decision will then be made rapidly.

Sport (Television Coverage)

11. **Mr. Baker:** What plans he has to protect live coverage of key sporting events on terrestrial television. [13437]

Mr. Chris Smith: As we promised before the election, we are considering the nature and extent of the list of major domestic and international sporting events that must be available for live coverage on terrestrial television. I have recently consulted all interested parties on the principles that ought to apply to such a list. The results of that consultation have been received and I shall shortly be appointing an advisory group to advise me further.

Mr. Baker: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Does he recognise that many people will feel that it is wrong that major sporting events, which belong to the nation, such as one-day international cricket or Premier League football, are denied to ordinary people who do not have access to Mr. Murdoch's satellite television at the exorbitant charge of £22 a month? Will the right hon. Gentleman take steps to ensure that those events are given proper consideration in his review? Will he also recognise that the definition of terrestrial television should not include Channel 5 because many parts of the country, including my constituency, do not receive it?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point on Channel 5. He also has to recognise that, in determining this issue, we need to achieve a proper balance between the need for sporting organisations to get the best possible value from the matches and games that they are putting on and the right of ordinary people who cannot afford and do not want to afford subscription television to see major national events. It is getting that balance right that the review is all about.

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO (MILLENNIUM EXPERIENCE)

The Minister was asked—

Transport Infrastructure

27. **Dr. Starkey:** What plans he has to secure the provision of an adequate transport infrastructure for the millennium experience. [13454]

The Minister without Portfolio (Mr. Peter Mandelson): In addition to the road improvements under way, there will be an excellent public transport network offering visitors a variety of ways to travel to the millennium experience, including new river boat services and the new Jubilee line extension. These developments will be an important legacy for our investment and I am sure that they will be welcomed by the whole House.

Dr. Starkey: I thank the Minister for his reply. He may be aware from reports in today's press that public interest in the millennium exhibition is extremely high and that there are concerns that there may be some problems with congestion. What steps is he taking to ensure that visitors to the exhibition spend the maximum amount of time enjoying themselves at the exhibits and the minimum amount in queues to get in?

Mr. Mandelson: Our single most important objective is to ensure that when people come to Greenwich—we are expecting 12 million visitors in 2000—they have a once-in-a-lifetime experience, full of excitement and enjoyment, without delay or frustration in travelling to and moving around the millennium dome. That is why the New Millennium Experience Company has developed an operational plan that, through pre-booking of tickets, will guarantee access to attractions in the dome, ensure minimal queuing for the attractions and—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Stop it.

Mr. Mandelson: It will leave ample capacity in terms of the transport infrastructure that I have described.

Mr. Robathan: I am sure that the House will join me in welcoming the Minister to the Front Bench.

How delighted we are that he has come to answer questions, albeit for only five minutes. He may not be aware that I was given this question by his parliamentary private secretary; sadly, I got no supplementary.

What definite proposals are there for improving river transport? That is a serious matter for the whole of London in the future, and not just the millennium. What definite proposals are there for money from the public side and also private money to be put into transport down to Greenwich?

Mr. Mandelson: We expect 1 million people to travel by boat from central London using new pier and river services and park-and-sail sites to the east of the site. Decisions on temporary park-and-sail facilities are expected in December. Five applications with Greenwich, Barking and the London Docklands development corporation have already been lodged. I am very pleased to say that the New Millennium Experience Company and the Cross-River Partnership, working closely together, are making sure that we bring about this increased use of the Thames as part of the Deputy Prime Minister's Thames 2000 initiative.

Mr. Simon Hughes: May I add to the pressure on the Minister to ensure that river transport not only is provided for the millennium but becomes part of the infrastructure of London transport for visitors, commuters and residents alike, integrated with the other public transport systems and at a price that ordinary people can afford?

Mr. Mandelson: That is exactly what the Deputy Prime Minister has in mind. I am glad to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend is making considerable progress in developing river services and the new millennium pier at the Greenwich peninsula, as well as investing in other piers along the Thames back from the Greenwich peninsula. I stress that they will be a permanent, important legacy for the Thames for the entirety of London. That will not be the only important legacy, but it will be a very significant one flowing from our investment in the millennium experience.

Mr. Maude: It is usual to welcome a Minister on his first appearance at the Dispatch Box. It is unusual to have to wait six months to do it. At the rate of answering one question every six months, we can be sure that the Minister will not outstay his welcome.

Given that the most popular visitor attraction in London attracts no more than 2.5 million visitors a year, does the Minister have any basis for believing that 12 million visitors will be drawn to the millennium dome, other than the assertion in a letter from Jennifer Page, which mysteriously makes an appearance in the *Financial Times* today?

Mr. Mandelson: The right hon. Gentleman is not correct. The British museum attracts 6 million visitors every year. The estimate of 12 million visits to the millennium experience is based on industry projections and poll findings. An NOP poll a year ago, when the future of the project was highly uncertain, showed that a third of the population were interested in visiting. A Gallup poll for *The Daily Telegraph* in August predicted more than 10 million United Kingdom visitors. That is, of course, together with travel industry projections that put the expected number of overseas visitors at almost 2.5 million. I do not believe that there will be any shortage of visitors to the millennium experience—something which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming strongly.

LORD CHANCELLOR

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Morley Magistrates Court

32. **Mr. Gunnell:** What representations he has received in respect of proposals to close the magistrates court in Morley. [13459]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): No representations have been received by the Lord Chancellor's Department in respect of proposals to close Morley magistrates court. Magistrates courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of magistrates courts committees. Decisions concerning the future of any magistrates court are for the relevant MCC to determine, in consultation with the local paying authority.

Mr. Gunnell: I thank the Minister for his reply. Nevertheless, I am sure that he will understand the concern of those Morley magistrates who have met me when he has read the report of Her Majesty's inspectors recommending that Leeds MCC consider the use of the outer courthouses and the response to it. Will he ensure that, in considering such issues, committees take account of the latest position, the investment that has gone into courts and the social consequences of any suggestion that such courts should be closed? Closure would have serious consequences, both for those who serve in the courts in Morley and for those who have to answer charges there.

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that the magistrates courts committee will take that into account. I understand that, in the light of the Court Service inspectorate report of March 1997, the Leeds magistrates court committee decided at its meeting of 17 October 1997 to conduct a review of its outer courthouse premises at Morley, Pudsey and Wetherby. I assure my hon. Friend that no decisions have been taken at this stage of the review and no plans have been formulated on the outer courthouses.

I understand that the committee has recently written to the local paying authority, Leeds city council, and the local benches about additional accommodation and facilities which might be made available to the MMC at Morley and Pudsey.

Immigration Adjudicators

33. **Mr. Malins:** What plans he has to increase the training given to immigration adjudicators. [13460]

Mr. Hoon: Although training is primarily a matter for the chief adjudicator, we have substantially increased the money available for judicial training from £47,000 spent last year to £220,000 planned to be spent this year.

All new adjudicators receive two days' induction training, followed by a period of sitting in and mentoring by established adjudicators. Every adjudicator receives at least a day's training each year and attends a two-day conference at least every other year. They all have back-up from a research and information team.

Mr. Malins: Given that the immigration appellate system is judicial, not administrative, and that many immigration adjudicators are becoming extremely frustrated at what they see as an over-use, possibly an abuse, of judicial review—25 per cent. of all judicial reviews are now immigration related—is it not time that the Minister considered whether he should curb, restrict or in some way remove the rights of parties to seek judicial review of such decisions?

Mr. Hoon: As I have said before to the hon. Gentleman, a review of those matters is being undertaken by Ministers across Departments and, as a result, I hope that we will be able to bring forward proposals that meet his concerns.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I hope that my hon. Friend will bear it in mind that such issues must be looked at in a broad and tolerant way because we are dealing with people's lives. Two doctors in my constituency have been refused permission to bring in their mother on the basis that ladies aged 67 are not capable of work. I feel therefore that perhaps a little enlightenment in some of those Departments would not go amiss.

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Department's responsibilities relate to appeals. The enlightenment necessary in that context should be such as to ensure that such appeals are dealt with speedily, fairly and in a satisfactory manner.

Legal Aid

34. **Mr. Yeo:** What recent representations he has received regarding the availability of legal aid. [13461]

Mr. Hoon: I regularly receive representations from right hon. and hon. Members and the public about the availability of legal aid. Since my noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor's announcement on 18 October about the changes we propose to the rules on availability of legal aid for money claims, my officials have met the chairman of the Bar, the president of the Law Society, insurers and other professional and consumer interest groups.

Mr. Yeo: As the Government's proposals are likely to result in a substantial increase in business for the insurance industry, will the Minister tell the House with which insurance companies he has had discussions about those proposals and how many of them were financial contributors to the Labour party?

Mr. Hoon: A number of discussions have taken place with a variety of insurance companies. We are interested in ensuring the widest possible availability of insurance at the best possible price for the users.

Mr. Kidney: Will my hon. Friend confirm that the legal profession has made recent representations in favour of a conditional legal aid fund rather than the Lord Chancellor's preferred option of conditional fees arrangements? Will he confirm that the crucial difference is that a legal aid fund would pay for disbursements in a case along the way, such as court fees and expert fees, much more than the insurance premium mentioned under the conditional fees arrangement? Does my hon. Friend agree that many poor litigants would be unable to find those sums of money to fund their cases in the future?

Mr. Hoon: These are matters on which we are consulting. We are receiving representations from the Bar and the Law Society, as well as the views of insurance companies, on the affordability of the proposals. We will take all those matters into account to ensure that no one is unfairly excluded from the courts.

Mr. Burnett: When the Minister was in private practice and he first scrutinised the papers of a case and considered its merits, did he ever advise a client—other than those involved in personal injuries case—that he had a better than 75 per cent. chance of success?

Mr. Hoon: Of course, in those days I was not required to make such an assessment of a case; therefore, I never did. However, if the hon. Gentleman is referring to the proposal made by my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor that a case should attract a 75 per cent. chance of success before it should be granted legal aid, I can say only that it has been necessary to reach that test because of the failure of lawyers, over a long period, to satisfy adequately the existing test, which is essentially a 50 per cent. chance of success. We firmly believe that there is absolutely no reason why the taxpayer should have to support litigation that someone would not take forward privately.

Ms Abbott: Is my hon. Friend aware of the widespread concern about Government proposals on changes to legal aid, especially about whether poorer litigants will be able to afford the up-front costs of insurance and various medical fees for reports in medical negligence cases? Recent remarks by my hon. Friend seem to suggest that he thinks that solicitors will simply absorb those costs, but is that likely, given that many practices are not in a position to cross-subsidise legal aid or contingency work with lucrative private work?

Mr. Hoon: I have said that one of the solutions to the problem which my hon. Friend set out is that lawyers themselves could absorb those up-front costs. Most lawyers are in private practice and most businesses are required to expend a certain amount of capital—in this context, we are talking about time and some disbursements—before being able to achieve a return on their investment. I have suggested that that is one of the options, although, as I have already said, there are clearly others available.

Mr. Garnier: The Labour party policy document "Access to Justice", which was published just before the election, stated that conditional fees were not expected to make a significant improvement to access to justice and that they were little more than a gimmick designed to mask the state of the legal aid scheme. Was the Labour party wrong then, or is the Minister wrong now?

Mr. Hoon: We have had the benefit of academic research into the use of conditional fees. That research demonstrates that, in the approximately 28,000 cases so far agreed under conditional fees, there has been a remarkable success rate. We are happy to base our policy on the results of that academic research.

Magistrates Courts

35. **Mr. Barry Jones:** If he will make a statement on progress in respect of the rationalisation of the magistrates courts. [13462]

Mr. Hoon: My hon. Friend will be aware that, on 29 October, I made a statement to the House setting out in some detail the Government's plans for the future structure of the magistrates courts service.

Mr. Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that closures can be very controversial and sometimes very injurious to local communities? Does he understand that long distances can be involved, that taxis are expensive and that bus services are sometimes hopelessly unreliable? Would he be prepared to meet a group of magistrates to discuss such matters?

Mr. Hoon: I would certainly be willing to discuss such questions with any group of magistrates whom my hon. Friend cared to bring to the Department.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I wholly endorse what the hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mr. Jones) just said. Is the Minister aware that the Gloucestershire magistrates courts committee is consulting on the closure of Stow-on-the-Wold magistrates court? That so-called consultation is not an open exercise; it consists of consultation among the staff of the various magistrates courts, the Crown Prosecution Service and other officials, but it does not involve members of the public. Will the Minister urgently investigate that situation? Surely it is the public who use the justice system of this country and who will be inconvenienced by the closure of the court who ought to be consulted first, and not afterwards.

Mr. Hoon: I should be delighted to ensure that those local questions are thoroughly investigated, but I emphasise that they are local matters for decision by local magistrates courts committees. The matter only reaches the desk of my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor in the event of the local paying authority appealing against the decision made locally by the magistrates courts committee.

Mr. Ainger: Is my hon. Friend aware that that was the policy followed under the previous Administration? In my present constituency and my previous constituency, under the previous Administration more than 75 per cent. of our magistrates courts closed, but, at the same time, we saw no improvement whatsoever in the quality of those magistrates courts that remained. Will my hon. Friend give me and the House an assurance that, under his policy, while there will be rationalisation of magistrates courts, there will also be an improvement in existing magistrates courts to serve the best interests not only of the accused, but of victims and witnesses?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. I mentioned in the statement to which I recently referred that it was important that we streamlined and integrated the functions of the various agencies responsible for our criminal justice system. I anticipate, in the light of the statement that I made to the House, that that will be achieved.

Accommodation (Palace of Westminster)

36. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** If he will report on progress in the refurbishment of the Lord Chancellor's accommodation within the Palace of Westminster, indicating the latest estimated cost. [13463]

Mr. Hoon: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his concern about the need to refurbish my 9 by 4 office in the House of Commons—hitherto, he has not been noted for his concern for the welfare of Labour Members of Parliament. I am, however, delighted to discover that he is now participating in the art of constructive, helpful opposition.

For the sake of completeness, I should mention also that it has been suggested to me that this question is the product not of kindness but of incompetence, and that the hon. Gentleman is actually referring to the official residence provided by the House authorities to the Lord Chancellor. If that is so, I can assure him that the refurbishment has commenced and is expected to be substantially completed by January next year. The estimated cost remains at £650,000.

Mr. Howarth: That is a most offensive answer. We know that old Labour still survives on the Government Benches; that cavalier attitude to £650,000 of public expenditure on the Lord Chancellor's accommodation betrays that fact.

My question on the Order Paper relates not to the Minister's accommodation but to the Lord Chancellor's—

Mr. Hoon *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: I have not finished yet. Given that the Minister's right hon. and noble Friend wishes to dispense with the traditional attire of his office and to hand over power to the judges, perhaps the only sense in which the Lord Chancellor remains traditional is that, like all socialists, he is anxious to spend as much of other people's money as he possibly can.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman got his question wrong the first time. He will know that the Lord Chancellor is the Speaker of the House of Lords, and the official residence is provided for his use in precisely the same way as Speaker's House is provided for the Speaker of this House. It is entirely appropriate, therefore, that both Departments should be properly conserved as part of the historic building programme undertaken over a 10-year period by the House authorities. Speaker's House has been maintained to a high standard, in keeping with the conservation policy, and the Lord Chancellor's official residence should match that standard.

Iraq

3.32 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the crisis with Iraq.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett): Saddam Hussein is once more defying the clearly expressed will of the United Nations and of the international community by refusing to allow the United Nations special commission, UNSCOM, to carry out weapons inspections. It is essential for the region and the rest of the world that UNSCOM be allowed to carry out its work. We know that Saddam Hussein still has the capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction. UNSCOM is crucial to ensuring that they are all destroyed.

It is clear that Saddam Hussein has misjudged the will of the United Nations. Security Council unanimity was demonstrated in the presidential statement issued the day the threat was made. The Government are determined to stand against Saddam Hussein. He is a dictator who has demonstrated a total lack of interest in the welfare of the Iraqi people. He has shown by his past actions that he is a threat to regional peace and regional security.

The Government are closely consulting other members of the Security Council to explore to the full diplomatic means of resolving the situation. We remain hopeful that Saddam Hussein will realise that co-operation with UNSCOM is the only way for Iraq to progress towards a lifting of sanctions.

Mr. Winnick: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is he aware that everyone in the House hopes that there will be a satisfactory diplomatic solution and that we are all hoping and praying that that will be the case? Is he further aware, however, that the full responsibility for the crisis certainly lies with the Iraqi dictator, and only with the Iraqi dictator?

Was not the Iraqi dictator responsible for the war against Iran started in 1980, which went on for so long? Was he not responsible for the invasion of Kuwait, and for acts of outright butchery inside Iraq, including the gassing of Kurds in 1988? We are indeed dealing with a notorious criminal, a murderous tyrant.

If the international community were to climb down now, what would be the next act by the Iraqi dictator? Is not the lesson to be learnt time and again that if democracies are dealing with such a criminal and murderous dictator, the only way for those democracies to act effectively is to stand firm, not to give in—no appeasement? I hope that that policy will be pursued.

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend sets out clearly the indictment sheet against Saddam Hussein. There is a long history of terrible crimes against his own people and other people in the region. My hon. Friend is also right in saying that the United Nations and the British Government are determined to support UNSCOM and to ensure that UNSCOM is able to carry out its work. Without that support, there is a threat to others in the region; we are talking about weapons of mass destruction, biological and chemical weapons, and it is crucial that we understand the scale of the threat from Saddam Hussein.

The position taken by the United Nations is not negotiable. We want Saddam Hussein to withdraw the threat to UNSCOM. That is the only position that is acceptable to us.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): May I assure the Minister that he has the full support of Her Majesty's Opposition in the response that he has just given? Does he agree that the actions of Saddam Hussein amount to a naked challenge to the authority of the United Nations and therefore to the world community? Does he agree with Sandy Berger, the national security adviser to President Clinton, that Richard Butler, the Australian head of the inspection team, is a total professional, running the inspection operation in an entirely apolitical way?

Will the Minister confirm that the quarrel of the United Nations is with Saddam Hussein, not with the people of Iraq, who suffer most grievously of all from his tyranny? Will he also confirm that if diplomatic means are not successful in resolving this very difficult situation, other methods, including the use of force, have not been ruled out?

Finally, will the Minister give the House an undertaking that he will not allow his handling of the matter to be in any way influenced by his past? Does he now accept that if his support for the peace tax campaign to entitle people to withhold that part of their income tax devoted to defence had succeeded, Britain would not have been able to play any part in upholding international law and order?

Mr. Fatchett: I welcome the right hon. and learned Gentleman's support for the United Kingdom Government and the position taken by the United Nations. I also share his assessment of the work of Butler and his colleagues, and the right hon. and learned Gentleman is right in saying that that work is apolitical and on behalf of the United Nations. It is important that the principle of United Nations bodies being open to people of all nationalities is preserved, which is why the United Nations has taken the position that it has adopted.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is also right in saying that this is a naked challenge to the authority of the United Nations by Saddam Hussein. It is Saddam Hussein who has put at risk the living standards and the lives of the people of Iraq. We have condemned, and will continue to condemn, all those actions. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is aware that the United Nations resolutions allow Saddam Hussein to use oil revenues for humanitarian purposes, and we have had the greatest difficulty in persuading Saddam Hussein to do so.

Mr. Winnick: Why does he not do so?

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to that.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman also asked whether we would rule out any options in our response. From the very first moment when Saddam Hussein uttered his threat, we have made it clear that no option is ruled out. That is still the United Kingdom Government's position.

I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for all the earlier comments that he made. I suspect that, when he looks at his response to my important statement to the House, he will regret his cheap final comments.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): May I plead with my hon. Friends to be extremely cautious before endorsing

American unilateral actions? I visited Baghdad three years after the war and, like every other visitor, I was taken on the first morning to Amariya, to the bomb shelter hit by a cruise missile, where charred bodies were sketched into the walls. Far from weakening the Tikriti group and Saddam Hussein, such an attack strengthens Saddam Hussein's position.

Earlier this month, I spent a 17-day holiday—paid for by me, incidentally—in Iran. Those who lost a million people in that nine-year war do not think that it is right for the Americans to start launching cruise missiles on their neighbour. Would it not be much better at least to hear what Tariq Aziz has to say and to realise that we are dealing with desperate people who feel that they have nothing to lose in order to end the sanctions that are creating such misery? Those who have been round a children's hospital in Baghdad, as I have, and seen infants expiring in their presence—this is no exaggeration—take a different view of the effect of sanctions.

Mr. Fatchett: I never doubt my hon. Friend's sincerity, but he needs to look at the tactical and strategic options before the world community. If we allow Saddam Hussein to defy the United Nations and the world community, we offer him a green light to terrorism against his own people and others in the region. We must stand firm, because that is the principle which the history of the 20th century has taught us.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Is the Minister aware that both sides of the House recognise that, in seeking a successful outcome without hostilities through every available diplomatic means, it is essential that the international community speaks as one and betrays neither disunity nor lack of resolve? However, military action by Iraq against a plane or personnel engaged in performing a UN mandate would be intolerable and, in extremis, that must be met by firm but proportionate force. Will the Minister assure the House that if British military assets are committed in that way, the matter will be reported to the House at the earliest opportunity?

Mr. Fatchett: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments on behalf of the Liberal Democrat party. We share his concerns about the nature of the regime in Iraq and the need to take concerted action. He will recall that the presidential statement made 10 days ago was a unanimous presidential statement from the Security Council. We are working with our colleagues to ensure that we maintain diplomatic unanimity in our response to Saddam Hussein. I repeat that the crucial point for us all is that Saddam Hussein must understand the message that we are not in a negotiating position; there are no compromises; he must accept that UNSCOM can do its work. That is in the interests of the Iraqi people and the people of the region. We cannot allow that dictator to continue to develop weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): In considering the options that lie before the Government, will the Minister take into account the fact that independent sources suggest that more than half a million children under five have died in Iraq as a direct result of the sanctions? Those people have no power whatever to topple President Saddam Hussein, who, in the course of his life, has received enormous support from successive British and American Governments, notably during the Iran-Iraq war.

Will my hon. Friend also give consideration to the fact that the French, the Chinese and the Russians, who are all permanent members of the Security Council, have indicated that they could not authorise the use of force without an explicit Security Council resolution, and that the secretary-general of the Arab League, representing important interests in the area, has come out strongly against the use of force? Other means must be found to deal with the situation.

Mr. Fatchett: Let me correct my right hon. Friend's assertion in two respects. First, in relation to the statement issued by the Security Council on UNSCOM, there was no division among the permanent members of the Security Council: there was unanimity across the Security Council for the presidential statement. If we try to create false divisions, the only person who will gain any advantage from that is Saddam Hussein.

Secondly, the United Nations resolutions have throughout provided the opportunity for Saddam Hussein to sell oil in order to improve the well-being of the people of Iraq. The simple fact is that he has not taken those opportunities. Do not blame the United Nations; do not blame the British Government; blame Saddam Hussein. He would prefer to spend money on weapons of mass destruction rather than on the people of Iraq. We understand the scale of his values and the nature of his priorities. That is why world opinion must be solidly against him.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): I support the Minister's statement. Can he assure us that his Department, which recognises the value of diplomacy in a crisis such as the present one, also recognises the importance of other means, to which he alluded, to underpin that diplomacy? May we, therefore, take it for granted that his Department will be making representations during the current defence review, to ensure that the Ministry of Defence in the United Kingdom has adequate military means to underpin our diplomacy wherever that may be necessary, to contain threats to peace and to contain dictators such as Saddam Hussein, who are engaged on programmes for the development and construction of weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. Fatchett: On the hon. Gentleman's second question relating to our military capacity, the answer is yes. Those views will be expressed clearly during the review of Britain's military capacity. On his first question, we have said on many occasions since the presidential statement was issued from the United Nations that we do not rule out any option, and we are very clear in our language.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his strong words on the issue. Will he remind the shadow Foreign Secretary that the right hon. and learned Gentleman was a member of the previous Government, who helped to arm Saddam Hussein, and that many of the components for the weapons of mass destruction were supplied to him during that time?

[Ann Clwyd]

We have all been to Iraq and seen the situation there. The sanctions apply to the north and the south. There are people who are short of food and medicines in both the north and the south. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend knows, throughout the period of the UN sanctions, those sanctions have been busted, with the complicity of the people on the borders, who should have been checking that the sanctions were adhered to.

I hope that my hon. Friend will continue in his decisive and robust assessment of the situation, and that if military action becomes necessary, we shall be party to it.

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend has a long history of interest in Iraq and the problems facing the people of Iraq. She makes a powerful case for looking at the history of northern and southern Iraq, and at what has happened to the Kurds in the north and to the marsh Arabs in the south, both of which communities have been victims of Saddam Hussein. It is worth putting it on the record that both communities are victims of the dictatorship of their own leadership.

With regard to my hon. Friend's point about the previous Administration and their responsibility for arming Saddam Hussein, I concur with her. It would be wrong to get into cheap party political point scoring. We have already had one example of that, which failed miserably, and I do not want to follow the example of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and lower the tone further.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): The Minister said correctly that diplomatic channels are the best means of resolving the critical problem facing us. Will he confirm whether additional intermediaries are being used in the negotiation process with Saddam Hussein? Will the Minister advise the House of the attitude of the NATO alliance in the context of his assertion that no option will be ruled out? Will he also reassure hon. Members like me who represent constituencies where Tornados are based? The 12th squadron from Lossiemouth is currently engaged in surveillance and peacekeeping operations and is expected to return home by the end of the month. What reassurance can I provide to my constituents that they need not fear for the fate of their husbands and for all those working on Tornados?

Mr. Fatchett: It might be useful if I take this opportunity to reassure the hon. Lady and other hon. Members that we are not in a negotiating position. The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, will report to the United Nations this afternoon about the mission that he sent to Baghdad. It was not a negotiating mission, but was intended simply to remind Saddam Hussein of the United Nations resolutions and the presidential statement, and to make it clear that there is only one option available: Saddam Hussein must comply with the United Nations resolutions. If he does not do that, I repeat that all options will be available to us and that we shall consider each and every one of those options in order to identify the best means of achieving the United Nations objectives.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Will my hon. Friend confirm that, under international law, there is a right of unconditional access to the sites for purposes of weapons inspection? It would establish a disastrous precedent if Saddam Hussein or anyone else were able to pick and choose from which nations the members of the inspection team came or with which clauses of the relevant United Nations resolutions he wished to comply. Surely the credibility of the United Nations as a world organisation is at stake in this crisis.

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend is right both on the legal points and in terms of the implications for the United Nations. However, I must add a further point. The UNSCOM task is to deal with weapons of mass destruction. We are talking about not only nice legal or procedural points regarding the United Nations but the well-being of people in that region. Would any hon. Member trust Saddam Hussein with chemical and biological weapons? I suspect that the answer is self-evident.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I welcome the Government's and the Minister's firm resolve to resist the activities of Saddam Hussein. I draw the Minister's attention to some remarks made in this building only last Friday night by the former Commander-in-Chief of United Kingdom forces during the Gulf war, Air Chief Marshal Sir Patrick Hine. He made the point that, during the Gulf war, it was difficult trying to fight while seeing on television endless speculation about military options. Will the Minister join me in asking the media to resist the temptation of setting out all the military options—there are only a relatively small number—so that our forces are not put at risk and the Government's policy is not undermined?

Mr. Fatchett: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We must assess all the options. As to the military options—if we ever reach that situation—the assessments must be made in private and not in newspapers or in television studios. That is clearly in the best interests of any personnel who are engaged in military activities.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Is it not true that, if we had heeded the voice of those who opposed the war in 1991 and who tried to insist that we go down the sanctions route, Saddam Hussein would be today strutting round the streets of Kuwait? Is not the only way out of this dilemma to deal with him in the way that we have done in the past? It is the only language that that man understands. If we do not take action, Saddam Hussein will issue a threat against the developed world and it will be too late for us to meet it.

Mr. Fatchett: I agree with my hon. Friend's statements and the way in which he made them. Not only would Saddam Hussein be strutting round the streets of Kuwait, but I suspect that the dangers that he poses to other countries in the region would have materialised. We must get across the message that weapons of mass destruction know no boundaries or international obstacles. They could be used against any country in any circumstances.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I support the Minister's measured tones. I regret that some hon. Members may, on humanitarian grounds, give succour to one of the most despotic creatures that the world has

known. He has massacred many of his family and his citizens. We should not relieve him of the responsibility for the death of children in his nation. May I plead that any statements of support should express support for the United Nations decision? At no time should we appear to be joining in just because of leadership from the United States. It is important that those who make decisions in the United Nations should stand together and not leave it to one or two countries to do the policeman's work for the world.

Mr. Fatchett: I am pleased to re-emphasise the need for United Nations unanimity and for us to work with our partners on such issues. We are working on behalf of the United Nations and the international community. I welcome the first part of the hon. Gentleman's comments. The humanitarian balance is often difficult to strike, but we know from the lessons of the 20th century that appeasement leads to more loss of life than does taking a firm stand on principle.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Does the Minister recognise that any analysis of the Gulf war or the Iran-Iraq war shows that one of the causes was the voracious appetite of arms salesmen around the world? Is he not concerned that the huge level of arms sales to Turkey over the past few years, the massive recent invasion of northern Iraq by Turkish armed forces and Turkish intentions in the region also pose a threat to peace? What is the Government's attitude towards the Turkish incursion in a neighbouring country?

Mr. Fatchett: The first part of my hon. Friend's question was about arms sales. One reason for publishing our criteria for arms sales in July was so that our decisions should be open, clear and accountable. I have no doubt that he welcomed those criteria.

We have said since May, when the first Turkish incursion in northern Iraq took place, that we are seriously concerned about the territorial integrity of Iraq. We have strongly advised Turkey that any action taken should be commensurate with any threat perceived by Turkey. Our position is clear.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): Are not the people of Iraq faced with terrible conditions? On the one hand, they have Saddam Hussein's totalitarian dictatorship, which terrorises and exploits them. On the other hand, they have United Nations sanctions that bring about starvation, deprivation, lack of medical supplies in hospitals and the death of women and young children in droves. Have the United Nations or the Government applied themselves to resolving the terrible conundrum for the people of Iraq?

Mr. Fatchett: My hon. Friend's analysis is factually flawed. The United Nations resolutions provide Saddam Hussein with the opportunity to use oil revenues to meet the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people. My hon. Friend should address his question to the Iraqi dictator, who feels that it is in the interests of Iraq to spend money on weapons and military hardware rather than on the people of Iraq.

Points of Order

3.59 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid–Dorset and North Poole): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I tabled Question 28 to the Minister without Portfolio. Is it not unreasonable that we had only five minutes of his presence in the Chamber when it has taken us six months to get him here? During that five minutes, he managed to answer only one question. Would not democracy be better served by the Minister without Portfolio coming to this Chamber regularly, so that we could hold him accountable for his actions?

Madam Speaker: The time allocated to various Departments is not a matter for the Speaker; it is a matter which is arranged through the usual channels. I share, however, the hon. Gentleman's disappointment at not having his question called, although it was only the second question to the Minister without Portfolio. He will recall that on Question 27, to get a minority voice heard—I am sure that it is right that minority voices should be heard in the House—and to allow a Conservative Front Bencher to speak, I had to call four supplementaries. Often, that is where the time goes.

It is for the usual channels to determine the length of time for which Departments answer questions. I hope, however, that we can make better progress, because we are not making the progress that I would like to see at Question Times for all Departments.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Is there not a point of principle for the House of Commons? Is not the implication of the reply to the private notice question by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office that force could be used? Even if a British force is not committed, we as a country are endorsing the use of force. Is it not, therefore, right for the House of Commons at least to have the opportunity to express a view on the background to a complex situation, which was set out in the questions and by my hon. Friend the Minister? Would you, Madam Speaker, therefore hear an application for a debate on the dangerous situation in Iraq under Standing Order No. 24?

Madam Speaker: I judged an application for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 earlier today and thought it right that, rather than have such a debate, which was also applied for last week, the Minister should be brought to the Dispatch Box today. He has given the House a very full explanation of the situation.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will recall that last week, I raised with you the refusal by the President of the Board of Trade to answer a written question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). On that occasion, I undertook to give you further details of the situation about which I was complaining and which I was inviting you to rule out of order. I wrote to you and you kindly replied to me indicating that you did not think that it was a matter in which you would become involved.

You, Madam Speaker, will not, however, be surprised to know that I have undertaken further research into this important matter and into what I consider to be a neglect

[Mr. John Bercow]

of the rights of right hon. and hon. Members. I put to you, in the hope of securing a different ruling, the fact of which right hon. and hon. Members will be conscious. On 19 March this year, the House agreed a resolution on ministerial accountability, the third paragraph of which specifically stated:

"Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest".

Those terms were reproduced in subsection 4 of the first paragraph of the ministerial code, which was republished—*[Interruption.]* It was republished, not least for hon. Members' benefit, in July 1997 with the enthusiastic endorsement of the Prime Minister. In those circumstances, the refusal by the President of the Board of Trade to tell us when she was working during the summer recess might be judged to be out of order. Can you guide me, Madam Speaker, on how I can obtain an answer from the right hon. Lady?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: I do not need to take further points of order on the matter. Ministers are not accountable to the House for the hours they spend in their Departments. They are accountable at the Dispatch Box for policy decisions. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) seems to have got the bit between his teeth and to be very interested in procedure, as I am. He might like to apply for an Adjournment debate on a Wednesday or one evening, in which he may get the full answer he seeks.

Orders of the Day

Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I must inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague).

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Will you give a ruling on a matter concerning the Bill that we are about to discuss? A similar matter also appeared in the Scottish and Welsh referendum Bills. Clause 1 relates to a question on Government proposals to be put in a referendum. As yet, we have no such proposals, as they are to be included in the White Paper. Is it appropriate that we should debate legislation on proposals before we know what those proposals are?

Madam Speaker: Presumably, the hon. Gentleman is attempting to defend his party's amendment.

Mr. Hughes: That will come later.

Madam Speaker: I think that I know precisely what the hon. Gentleman has in mind. I remind him that the debate is perfectly in order; otherwise, we would not be continuing with it.

4.5 pm

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Since the abolition of the Greater London council 11 years ago, London has been the only western capital without any form of democratically elected citywide government.

For 11 years, the people of London have had to put up with an eccentric administrative patchwork made up of secretive Cabinet committees, ad hoc arrangements and a plague of quangos. No one was responsible, so no one was to blame. No one was ever to blame.

"Who governs London?", the people asked, "Who is in charge?"—and answer came there none. No one represented London. The Minister in the previous Government supposedly representing London actually represented a rural Suffolk constituency. The whole set-up was amateurish—and it showed.

London, with its customary inventiveness, did its best to compensate. Public, private and voluntary sectors came together in a variety of partnerships. They published strategies and launched initiatives, but there is a limit to what can be done by busy people with other responsibilities.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I wanted to pick up his rather sneering reference to amateurishness and his implication that there is something wrong with local government in London. How does he square that with a recently published survey in which international business

men who were asked which was the best city to visit, and do business in, voted for London way above all other cities? How does the Minister explain that, if London lacks the government for which he is about to argue?

Mr. Raynsford: Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman was not listening. He was keen to intervene, but not so keen to listen. My point is that the people of London—the private sector and the business community—all try to do their best despite the amateurish government framework. We know that the business community is committed to London and to our proposals. If the right hon. Gentleman reflected on the matter, he would realise that the Government speak for business in Britain, and his party is increasingly seen as an anti-business party.

Londoners were not convinced. They saw the result of years of strategic neglect: no one to speak up for London nationally and internationally, decaying infrastructure, traffic chaos, worsening air quality, unacceptable levels of crime and a growing division between the rich and poor. They saw what was wrong and demanded the opportunity to put things right. That is why they gave such massive support to the Labour party in the general election, delivering in London the highest swing to Labour in the entire country. That is why we have also received overwhelming public support for the proposals published in our Green Paper

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am sure that the Minister will agree that a whole series of factors could be attributed to the differential swing, including the fact that, in London, there was a large differential swing against the Labour party in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Mr. Raynsford: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for one of his customary interventions in debates on London. I look forward to many more. I remind him, as one of the few survivors representing his party in London, that the swing was an overwhelming and decisive one, which took Labour into a large part of the capital city that had not previously been represented by Labour Members. Areas such as Wimbledon, Romford and Finchley now all benefit from Labour representation—and that is very good indeed for London.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I have given way twice. I ask the hon. Gentleman to linger a little. I will give way to him in due course.

Londoners saw what was wrong and demanded the opportunity to put things right. That is why we received overwhelming public support for the proposals published in our Green Paper, and that is why I believe that Londoners will endorse our proposals in a referendum on 7 May.

It is not only the residents of London who are calling out for a mayor and an assembly for the capital. The business community has put its considerable weight behind our proposals. It is not surprising because we share the same goals: a desire for soundly based and steady economic growth, involving and benefiting the whole community; improved living standards; and a better quality of life for all. That cannot be done in a political vacuum. There is a need for real leadership and proper accountability.

The business community recognises that if London is to continue to be a leading world city, it needs a champion—someone with the authority to speak up on its behalf at home and abroad. There is much that such a champion needs to do. London needs to compete with other world cities—such as New York, Tokyo and Paris—for its economic survival. It needs to compete for investment, for visitors, for prestige. If anyone thinks that a London Olympic bid would stand a chance of success without strong civic leadership driving it forward, they have only to look at the history of the past 11 years.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): The hon. Gentleman rightly spoke about the importance of greater accountability to the people of London. How will that be achieved, as accountability to most people means accountability for money spent? There is no clear proposal for the assembly's tax, revenue or impost-raising powers—or, rather, for the budget to be raised by the mayor and approved by the assembly. Without that vital clarification, how on earth can accountability be achieved?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman questions accountability. I have always believed that it resulted from the democratic process, in which people stand for election because they believe that they have a contribution to make in terms of political and financial objectives. The people will ultimately judge their performance. That is the model which we are proposing. The Greater London authority will have powers concerning substantial sums of revenue that are currently discharged by other bodies—either central Government or other groupings. There will be a responsibility for finance, and democratic accountability will ensure that that finance is well used and prudently spent.

Only an elected city leader will have the necessary mandate to take on the kind of role required to ensure that London can advocate its case internationally and against increasing competition from other world cities. Only an elected city leader will have the necessary mandate to bring all of London together in support.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Minister knows that this is one of the most controversial areas of the Government's proposals and that the leader in very nearly every European capital city is chosen from its assembly, not elected separately. Does he accept that there are very strong arguments—even if he might have been persuaded not to agree with them—that a directly elected mayor is a more dangerous political animal and less democratic than one chosen by a democratic assembly, as in this Parliament?

Mr. Raynsford: No, I do not. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman suggests that an indirect election is more democratic than a direct election. I have been studying very carefully patterns in other countries, including other European countries. One of the visits that I made was to talk to the mayor of Cologne, with whom I discussed why his city has decided to change its procedure from one of indirect election to direct election. If the hon. Gentleman studies trends throughout the world, he will see that that

[Mr. Raynsford]

trend is growing because of concern about the line of direct accountability. London is one of the cities that will demonstrate the advantages of direct election.

Mr. Simon Hughes *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Raynsford: I have answered the hon. Gentleman's question; he does not like the answer.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): As there is a huge debate about the question of an elected mayor, is not there a case for a separate question in the referendum, so that people can vote on an elected authority for London, which will be strongly supported by all, and on a directly elected mayor who is less accountable if he or she is not answerable to an assembly?

Mr. Raynsford: As my hon. Friend has probably anticipated, I intend to cover that subject later in my speech. I hope that he will bear with me, because I will deal thoroughly with it later.

It is not just in the international arena that there is a role for the new authority. We need to improve the competitiveness of local businesses—whether small, medium or large—on which the London economy depends, and we need to tackle poverty and deprivation. Alongside the success stories, London has some of the highest unemployment and most deprived communities in Britain, cheek by jowl with some of the richest areas in Europe.

We need a new authority able to reach out to all London's communities and all London's diverse cultural and ethnic groups to help all participate in London's increasingly competitive economy. That is the basis for our proposal for a new Greater London authority and that is why the new authority will have a key role to play in ensuring that transport is improved and congestion tackled; in helping to regenerate the rundown parts of our city; in fighting crime; in promoting partnership of relevant interests to tackle these problems; and in making London a better place for Londoners.

We said in our manifesto:

"Londonwide responsibility for its own government is urgently required. We will make it happen."

Within just three months of taking office, we published a Green Paper setting out for consultation our proposals for a new Greater London authority. That consultation has generated more than 1,200 responses from all parts of the capital. All the responses are being read, and the views of Londoners and London organisations are being taken into account in working out our detailed proposals. We are studying the detail, but already it is clear that the consultation responses strongly support our proposals.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I thank the Minister for giving way; he has been generous with his time. He confidently asserted that the people and businesses of London want both an elected mayor and an elected assembly. If he is so confident of that, why will he not ask them separate questions?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman obviously was not listening when I replied to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) a moment ago. I said that I would cover the issue later in my speech and the hon. Gentleman might have had the courtesy to wait until I did so. I will cover it in detail and will give the hon. Gentleman an answer—not the one that he is looking for, but the one that he needs to hear.

The Bill is the next stage in keeping our promise to the people of London by giving them the chance to restore democratic citywide government to the capital and to have their say in a referendum on 7 May. I hope and believe that there will be an overwhelming endorsement of the Government's proposal.

The Bill is about providing for a referendum on proposals for a Greater London authority. It is not about the substance of the plans—they will be set out in a White Paper which we will publish in the spring. If the people vote yes to our proposals, legislation will be introduced next Session.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I understand that consultation on the referendum is primarily a matter for Londoners. I do not represent a London seat, but I represent an area policed by the Metropolitan police. The Minister is consulting Londoners, but I hope that he will also listen to those of us from outside London on policing. May we have an assurance that he will not try to bring my constituency and others into London at some stage in the future, because we would oppose that?

Mr. Raynsford: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have no proposals to amend the boundaries of London and that, if he has responded to the consultation, his views will be taken into account in our consideration of all the responses.

Before I deal with the referendum, I wish to restate briefly the key features of the authority. We promised in our manifesto that we would create a new Greater London authority, comprising a directly elected mayor and a separately elected assembly, who together will be responsible for key strategic issues that can best be tackled on a Londonwide basis. We will keep that promise. We believe that that structure will ensure strong and accountable leadership for London.

The mayor will provide firm leadership and set the strategic direction for London—the mayor will be able to get things done. At home and abroad, the mayor will represent London's interests and aspirations. However, checks and balances are important. The assembly is essential to provide a proper framework of accountability and to scrutinise the mayor's plans and strategies and their delivery. This is not a package from which we can pick and choose. A mayor alone, without an assembly, would wield too much power. An assembly alone, without a mayor, would not give London the focus and leadership that it so desperately needs.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The Minister may be right about the incompatibility of a mayor without an assembly, but it is equally possible that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) or my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) may be right. This is a matter of political debate which will be decided either by

elections or by a referendum, but the people will not get an opportunity to decide unless there are two separate questions.

Mr. Raynsford: I made a mistake in giving way to the hon. Gentleman, who clearly failed to listen to my responses to his hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North. If he bears with me, I will reach that subject.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): Does the Minister agree that the Government's action in holding a referendum distinguishes us clearly from the action of the previous Government, who abolished the Greater London council without asking the people of London for their views?

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

Together, the mayor and assembly are the best deal for London. Unlike the half-considered—indeed half-baked—alternatives offered up by some, it will work. To those who argue for two, three or more questions—some would like to set Londoners a regular exam paper full of questions—I say this: as a responsible Government, we can put to the people of London only a proposition that will work.

Some of the ideas that the Opposition are putting forward simply would not work. We are not impressed by gimmickry or by political posturing. Designing a new form of government is a serious business—it is not a lucky dip or a pick-and-mix. A mayor without an assembly would be a concept seen nowhere in the world, and for good reason. Where would the checks and balances lie? Who would consider and review the mayor's plans? Who would monitor progress and scrutinise the activities of the mayor?

According to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), it should be a committee drawn from the leaders of the 32 London boroughs. Let me just remind him what London's newspaper, the *Evening Standard*, had to say about that proposition:

"It is implausible that"

the 32 borough leaders

"could . . . provide an effective balance to the mayoralty."

Of course, anyone with any practical experience of the processes of government would know exactly why. Every borough council leader would quite understandably use his or her influence to seek advantage for his or her borough. That is their rightful, current role.

Only an Opposition as hopelessly confused and out of touch with reality as the present one could suggest such a formula for calling the mayor to account, confusing as it does the local interest of each borough with the wider interest of London as a whole. This is, of course, the same party which used to claim that there was no need for citywide government and that the 32 London boroughs could provide an appropriate framework for the government of London. That was the Conservatives' argument until 1 May. They were wrong then and they are wrong now. We will have no truck with such ill-thought-out proposals.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): The Minister is talking about having a strong mayor, fighting for London, yet he wants immediately to cripple him with an assembly that will not let him move. It is a recipe for conflict: between the boroughs and the assembly; the boroughs and the mayor; the assembly and the mayor; and all three and the Government. Nothing will happen.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman spoke for the previous Government before the general election, and he was wrong: he advocated the solution that I have just described, in which there would be no citywide authority, and opposed our proposals for such an authority. He should reflect on the fact that the people of London overwhelmingly rejected his party's view.

If the hon. Gentleman believes that the presence of an assembly will inhibit a strong mayor, let him visit cities throughout the world that enjoy the benefit of a framework of government with a mayor and an assembly. Let him go to New York, to see how that city has tackled the crime problem; to Barcelona, to see how that city has regenerated its fortunes; to any of the cities where effective mayors are working in an accountable framework with assemblies. He will see that his argument is complete nonsense.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Given that the proposed question is very much a like-it-or-lump-it question, does the Minister agree that there is a danger that it will fail to enthuse and engage the electorate in London in a genuine debate, and that, as a consequence, the turnout will be too low?

Mr. Raynsford: If the hon. Gentleman believes that, he is even more out of touch than the official Opposition party. Is he unaware of the extraordinary public interest in our proposals since they were published and of the amount of attention that is being given to who will be the first mayor of London? Can he, or any other Opposition Member, recall an occasion when a local government election, probably two years away, aroused so much interest that people were already queuing up to stand?

Sir Paul Beresford *rose—*

Mr. Pickles *rose—*

Mr. Raynsford: I have already given way to the hon. Gentlemen and their questions were inappropriate and ill thought out. I intend to make a bit more progress.

We intend to put a clear and simple proposition to the people of London, based on proposals that we can recommend to them with confidence, and to give them the chance to endorse or reject it—yes or no—in a referendum.

Let me remind all those Conservative Members who are trying to generate a synthetic protest under the banner of democracy that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) said, when the Tory Government took away from the people of London in 1986 the right to elect their own citywide government, there was no referendum: no question at all. The people of London were given no choice.

It is sheer cant for Conservative Members to complain at the nature of the choice being offered to the people of London. Had their party won the 1997 general election, there would not have been two questions, three questions

[Mr. Raynsford]

or four questions: there would not have been a single question. They would have denied the people of London any question at all, and it is the grossest hypocrisy on their part to complain when the new Labour Government honour their manifesto pledge to give the people of London a clear choice on proposals for a new Greater London authority, comprising a directly elected mayor and a separately elected assembly.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): The Minister keeps talking about a directly elected mayor and a directly elected assembly. Why does not the question to be posed in the referendum, as set out in the schedule to the Bill, say that specifically? Why does it leave out the word "directly"?

Mr. Raynsford: The question is one on which we have taken considerable advice, and we have tried to ensure that it is framed so as to be as comprehensible as possible to the widest range of Londoners. As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, there can be confusion with the framing of questions, and if the electorate are not clear there will not be a satisfactory outcome.

Let me remind the hon. Gentleman of the question that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) suggested was appropriate. He suggested that there should be two questions, although his party now seems, judging by its amendment, to want three or more. A couple of weeks ago, he said on the radio:

"There should be a simple first question: do you want a London-wide government elected by Londoners, yes or no? And there should be a simple second question: do you want that in a parliamentary style where they elect their leader or do you want directly to elect separately a mayor and an assembly?"

If the hon. Gentleman thinks that that will produce a clear result, he is living in a different city, on a different planet.

We have sought to frame the question simply and clearly to ensure that there is no ambiguity and confusion. That is what we are proposing and if the hon. Gentleman reflects on the question in the schedule, he will realise that that is what we have achieved.

As with the referendums in Scotland and Wales, this Bill is relatively simple in legislative terms and I shall take a few moments to explain its provisions in more detail.

Clause 1 provides for a referendum to be held on 7 May 1998, or at a later date if so appointed by Order in Council, and for the question that is to be voted on—the form of which is set out in the schedule.

The provision for changing the date of the vote is there only for use in the event of unavoidable outside circumstances forcing a postponement. We recognise the advantage of the two happening on the same day. Through combining the referendum with local elections, we will deliver savings of between £2 million and £3 million to the public purse.

Clause 2 defines who will be entitled to vote in the referendum. It will be those eligible to vote in local government elections in any London borough and those entitled to vote in ward elections in the City of London by virtue of residency. It is reasonable that the people who live in London should be those who will determine the future government of their city.

Clause 3 provides for the appointment and functions of a chief counting officer for Greater London and of counting officers for each borough and the City of London.

Clause 4 sets out regulations governing the conduct of the poll. It provides for the poll to be combined with the local elections and for provision to be made by Order in Council, following affirmative resolution of both Houses, as to the conduct of the referendum and the combination of the polls.

Clause 5 enables the Secretary of State, with the consent of the Treasury, to pay grants to London boroughs and the City of London in respect of expenditure incurred in connection with the referendum.

Clause 6 excludes legal proceedings to question the results of the referendum as certified by the chief counting officer or a counting officer. Similar provision was made in previous referendum legislation. It is designed to prevent frivolous challenges and legal obstructionism.

Parts II and III of the Bill deal with expenditure and paving provisions. It is intended that there should be fast progress towards the creation of the new authority. The Bill therefore provides for initial work to be done on the electoral areas of the authority and for expenditure primarily on obtaining and preparing accommodation for the new authority. Those provisions will not be used until an affirmative vote has been achieved in the referendum, and significant expenditure will be incurred only after the Second Reading of the substantive Bill establishing the authority.

Clause 7 confers new functions on the Local Government Commission requiring it, at the direction of the Secretary of State, to prepare a report recommending electoral divisions into which Greater London should be divided for elections to the new authority.

Clauses 8 to 10 set out the framework within which the commission must operate. It enables the Secretary of State to give the commission directions on how it should carry out its functions under this part of the Bill. Clause 11 provides for payment to be made to the commission in respect of its functions under this part.

Clause 12 provides for expenditure to be made in connection with the referendum and preparation for the authority. Finally, the schedule to the Bill sets out the form of the question on which London will vote. As I have stressed, in drafting the question we have taken expert advice, including focus group research. We believe that the question is as clear and fair as possible.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I am obliged to the Minister for giving way. He referred to part II of the Bill and the electoral commission. What the Bill does not mention is the method of election. How will the commission know on which basis it is drawing its conclusions?

Mr. Raynsford: As the hon. Gentleman will see from the relevant clause, the Secretary of State has powers to give direction to the boundary commission on the way in which it should approach its task. Those powers would not be used—I stress that—until there had been an affirmative vote in the referendum, by which stage the Government will have published their White Paper setting out their direct proposals. We will make clear our proposals for the election method and the constituencies.

As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, we consulted very openly on that. The Green Paper set out a range of options and possibilities. We have had a lot of responses—varied responses, as I am sure he will understand—and we are analysing them. Until we have completed the analysis and reached firm conclusions, it would be inappropriate to respond further to his question.

Mr. Ottaway: Can the Minister therefore confirm that first past the post remains an option?

Mr. Raynsford: Yes. No decision has been reached on the form of election to be adopted. As I said, we have consulted and we are considering the responses. A decision will be reached and our conclusions set out in a White Paper to be published in March in good time, before the referendum in which the people of London will be asked to express their view on our proposals.

The Prime Minister pledged to reform our constitution and to clean up and modernise British politics, and we are moving fast. Since the general election, we have delivered referendums on devolution to Scotland and Wales. We have announced our attention to incorporate the European convention on human rights, and we will create regional development agencies to bring new economic life to our regions. The referendum with which the Bill is concerned will be an historic opportunity for Londoners to take control of their destiny, to right the wrongs of 1986 and to erase the insult done to the people of London by a Government who cared little for the capital, disregarded the wishes of its people and left it for 11 long years without leadership and without a voice. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.35 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): I beg to move, To leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill because it fails to provide for Londoners to be consulted on proposals for an Assembly and for a directly elected Mayor separately."

It is a great pleasure to follow the Minister, who was very briefly my Member of Parliament in Fulham until the electors intervened. He has moved to Greenwich, where in his election address he made the same promises of devotion to its electors as he did in Fulham. He takes great pleasure in campaigning for the millennium dome for Greenwich, so perhaps the electors of Fulham should be thankful for his move.

The great irony of the Government's approach to the legislation is that there is much in the principle of what is proposed that Conservative Members can support. We can support the principle of a directly elected mayor. We can support the principle of such a mayor not only acting as a voice for London but having a role in, for example, transport policy. We can support the principle of a referendum, because it is essential to know what the people of London want. Any system of local government must have the support of the public.

The fatal flaw concerns the fact that we are debating not the Second Reading of the Greater London authority Bill, although many of the Minister's introductory remarks were concerned with that, but the referendum Bill. The Government say that they want to know the views of London and that that is the purpose of this legislation, yet, when it comes to it, they are not prepared to allow the public to express a view on any question where the public may disagree with their position. They can express an opinion about the need for a mayor, but cannot express a separate opinion about the need for an assembly. I will come to that argument in a moment, but it is precisely the same as that advanced by the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn)

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): In view of his remarks, may I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman apologises on behalf of his party to the people of London for denying them democratic government of their city for the past decade?

Sir Norman Fowler: I do not apologise for that. There was overwhelming public support for the abolition of the Greater London council. Labour Members need to decide whether they support the Greater London authority, as set out in the Green Paper, or restoration of the GLC. I am not sure whether the Minister for Sport has been fired but he is currently residing on the Back Benches.

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): I have come to listen to the right hon. Gentleman's speech. I should be certified.

Sir Norman Fowler: I think that I heard the hon. Gentleman say that he was being certified.

Londoners are being asked to express a view before the Bill setting up the Greater London authority has been published, debated or scrutinised, let alone passed by Parliament. The Labour party once contended that such pre-legislative referendums were the wrong way of doing things.

The Secretary of State for Wales once said that the trouble with pre-legislation referendums is that there are so many questions that one cannot answer. He was right. Without the completed legislation, we do not know exactly what is proposed. The public do not know what they are supposed to be judging. The devil is in the detail and, without that detail, the public are unsighted and can be deceived.

London will be left in an entirely unsatisfactory position. The public will be asked what they think of the idea of a mayor and a directly elected assembly, but they will not know what powers either will have as laid down by Parliament, which is the only body that can decide them. At this stage, we do not even have a White Paper, merely a Green Paper which contains a series of principles and asks a lengthy set of questions.

Ms Hodge *rose—*

Sir Norman Fowler: I am happy to give way to the Labour party's candidate for the mayor of London.

Ms Hodge: I am certainly not a candidate. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House whether he will join the Government in recommending to the people of London that they should support the referendum? Yes or no?

Sir Norman Fowler: We have set out our position exactly in our amendment, and I am sorry that the

[Sir Norman Fowler]

hon. Lady has not read it—if she did, she would understand our position. It is very sad news to hear that the hon. Lady does not intend to stand as the Labour candidate for mayor because we would be greatly in favour of her candidature.

Ms Hodge *rose—*

Sir Norman Fowler: No. I will not give way again.

Let us consider the principles as set down by the Government. Doubtless Londoners will be reassured to know that the proposed Greater London authority will be strategic, democratic, inclusive, effective, small, audible, consensual, efficient and influential. That wish list leaves out only motherhood and apple pie. Doubtless, those were exactly the kind of good intentions that paved the way for the old Greater London council.

The House will want to know the answers to questions that go to the heart of the new authority, but it is being asked to approve a referendum based on the principles. Even someone who has been following the plans as closely as the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) cannot tell us what the legislation will specify about a range of issues. She cannot tell us because the Government cannot tell us.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) has already made clear, the Government cannot tell us what method will be used for the election of the mayor. *[Interruption.]* If I put the question, perhaps the Minister will be more ready with the answer. Will that election be made according to who is first past the post? Will it be judged on the second ballot system or the alternative vote system? We do not know, but all those methods are trailed in the Green Paper.

Mr. Raynsford: Given that the right hon. Gentleman appears to be unhappy about the proposition that there should be a vote on the principle before the full detail is covered in legislation, can he tell the House whether he voted with his Government in favour of the paving Bill to abolish the GLC before the detailed, substantive legislation was published?

Sir Norman Fowler: I probably did and I have absolutely no regrets.

The Government must answer the questions about the legislation that they are introducing. They claim that they want as much agreement and support as possible, but once anyone takes any steps towards their position, they retreat to the old familiar party politics of the Labour party which we know so well.

The Government cannot tell us what method will be used to elect the assembly. They cannot even tell us whether it will consist of single-seat constituencies, multi-seat constituencies or even a single, London/wide constituency. They do not know. Once again, we must ask whether those elections will be decided according to the first-past-the-post system or the list system. The Green Paper states:

"electors vote not for an individual candidate but for a party which provides a list of candidates which are ranked in the order the party wishes".

We do not know the answer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) raised an important point about the cost of the new Greater London authority, but, once again, the Government could not say how it will be paid for. Speculation has centred on paragraph 4.21 and the idea that new taxes will be imposed. Again, the Government cannot tell us what those new taxes will be.

By any standards, we are faced with a long list of unanswered questions about the legislation—the Government have admitted as such by publishing a Green Paper with 61 unanswered questions about it.

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): It is called consultation.

Sir Norman Fowler: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman obviously has great difficulty in understanding that the Government should have consulted on their propositions before holding the referendum. The specific Act of Parliament is the only conclusive means of providing the necessary answers, but we will not have it, let alone the White Paper, before the referendum in May. The Minister said as much. There is no way that that Act will be ready then.

Mr. Raynsford: What about the White Paper?

Sir Norman Fowler: I should remind the Minister that the White Paper refers to the Government's proposals. I also remind him that we still work within a system according to which Parliament decides, not the Government—he might explain that to the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning.

The answer to the referendum could be affected directly by the answers that are eventually decided by Parliament, and it is clear that one question could lead to another. One such example is the proposal relating to the policing of London. The Government intend to set up a new police authority for the Metropolitan police. Everyone agrees that that is a profound change. The Home Secretary has been police authority since 1829 and, by definition, the system has lasted through a number of Labour Governments.

In the new proposed police authority, elected members will be in the majority, but they will not be the elected members of London's borough councils; they will be elected and selected from the new Greater London assembly. I suspect that before the public are expected to express a view on that, many people will want to know how local those elected representatives will be. If they were elected to the police authority according to a list system, they would simply be the choice of their respective parties. Many people might feel that no local link was provided under that new system. Many people may believe that members of an assembly elected according to a direct list or something like it would not have direct local links with the public. Presumably that link should be required. Given the importance that people attach to the Metropolitan police, and with the full facts before them, many people may vote against an assembly.

Mr. Wilshire: Does my right hon. Friend agree that matters are even worse than he has described since according to the Green Paper, elected members of the

Greater London authority will serve on that proposed police authority, and my constituents, who would not be within the Greater London authority, would not have an input? Does he agree that that is worrying?

Sir Norman Fowler: Yes. It is all very well for the Minister to laugh, but it is a matter of great importance to anyone who lives in London and is policed by the Metropolitan police.

The police authority for the Metropolitan police has lasted since 1829 and has been approved by every Labour Government of the century, bar this one, so there must be something to be said for it. My hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the new elected members who will be in the majority on that new police authority will be drawn from the new Greater London authority.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Norman Fowler: No. I will not give way.

My first objection to the Bill is that referendums should be held when the electorate are in the best possible position to judge.

Ms Joan Ryan (Enfield, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: I have just said that I will not give way again.

Referendums should be held when people can view all the pros and cons, when the arguments in favour and against have been rigorously tested and when Parliament has had the opportunity to scrutinise the legislation. We know at least some of the intentions, but we do not know what the legislation will say when it is on the statute book; under any sensible referendum system, it is only at that stage that the public should be asked for their views.

The second objection is that, even by the Government's own standards, the Bill does not deserve support because it puts together two questions. On the ballot paper, there will be one and only one question about whether the public support an authority

"made up of an elected mayor and a separately elected assembly".

That goes not only to the heart of the Bill, but to the heart of the Government's approach.

The Government say that they want to know Londoners' views on how they should be governed, but, when it comes to it, the Government are not prepared to put those views to the test. The Minister, in his best handbag-swinging style, said that there is no alternative—that it would be inappropriate to put questions of that sort—but no one outside the Labour party believes that those questions cannot be asked. The Minister seems to be arguing that the mayor and the assembly are an inseparable package, like the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister without Portfolio. The trouble is that almost nobody outside the Government agrees with that proposition.

The Minister quoted the only newspaper that has come out on his side on this issue—the *Evening Standard*. He did not quote the shoal of newspapers that have come out against him. He did not quote *The Times*, which, under the headline "Double Talk", said:

"Two distinct issues require two different questions".

He did not quote *The Guardian*, which can hardly be accused of being a Conservative-leaning paper—although I suppose anyone who is against the Government is accused of being Conservative-leaning. *The Guardian* asked why, if the Government are so sure of their case, they cannot put it to the people. Why can they not argue the case for a directly elected assembly if it is as self-evident as they appear to believe?

Mr. Raynsford: The right hon. Gentleman mentions *The Guardian*; can he confirm that the following words appear in the same editorial?

"Mr Raynsford dismisses the Conservative suggestion that the mayor could answer to the current 33 London boroughs as a 'recipe for disaster'. Any mayor could simply buy off the boroughs by chucking goodies their way, bringing US-style pork-barrel politics to the capital. The minister is right".

Sir Norman Fowler: That is the most extraordinary quotation, even by the Minister's standards, because whose words are followed by a dash and the words:

"but he should make that argument in a campaign."

The Minister has just shot himself in the foot. *The Guardian* makes the point that he is confident of his case, but is unable and unwilling to put it to the public. The newspaper, which is on his side, is saying as a friend—if the Minister is capable of accepting that anyone outside the Labour party can be a friend—that he should put his case to the public and let the public decide. To make an intervention like that, while relying on my not having the full quotation with me, brings the Minister pretty near the slippery methods of the used-car salesman.

Everyone knows that there are other options. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) supports at least one other option—actually, I think that he supports a series of options. Conservative Members favour a directly elected major, but we would have an assembly made up of London borough leaders—any mayor will have to work with the boroughs, so that must make sense. We reject the argument that such an arrangement will lead to conflict—indeed, we believe that the Government's plans have conflict built in at every stage, as well as layer after layer of local government.

Let us recall what the Government propose. They propose a directly elected mayor, a directly elected assembly, a regional development agency for London, a Government office for London and eventually 32 borough councils. That is not the end of it: under a Bill prepared by the Government that is to be introduced in another place as a private Member's Bill, there are to be permissive powers for directly elected executive borough mayors, so Hammersmith and Fulham—an area the Minister and I both know well—could have a directly elected mayor of its own.

One does not have to be a paid-up member of the Conservative party, or even the Liberal Democrats, to believe that such a structure is incredibly overlayered. If there is inbuilt conflict, it lies in such a system. There are indications that the Government are sensitive about the idea of a directly elected assembly, because they have changed the order in which mayor and assembly appear on the ballot paper by moving the elected assembly from first to second mention. I noted the Minister's remarks about the close attention paid to that matter.

[Sir Norman Fowler]

Above all, under the Government plans there is a certainty of conflict between the directly elected assembly and the already elected borough councils. It will not take long for the assembly to tire of having a purely advisory and questioning role and it takes no great skill at forecasting to know what the next step will be: the members of the assembly will want greater powers and their justification will be that they are elected. I doubt very much, however, whether those powers will come from the Government—I remember from my days in government that Whitehall is notoriously jealous of its empire. It is far more likely that those powers will come from the boroughs, so, step by step, we will get nearer to the concept of the old Greater London council.

London faces the fundamental question of whether it wants to put its future increasingly in the hands of an intermediate regional assembly, or to strengthen the borough council system that is unquestionably and undoubtedly closest to the public. We should be aiming, not for a new elected assembly, but for a mayor working with the boroughs, which have local experience and a direct connection with their electors.

What is so striking about the debate is the Government's lack of confidence in their own arguments. They talk about reaching agreement and consensus—at least outside the House—but they are not interested in agreement and consensus. This is a take-it-or-leave-it referendum. The Government do not want debate; they simply want their own plans to be rubber-stamped.

We believe that the people of London should first have the information to make a decision in the referendum and then be given the opportunity to judge for themselves whether London needs both a mayor and a directly elected assembly. As it stands, the Bill does not give them that choice, and that is why we will oppose it.

4.58 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I support the Bill, which represents the second stage in the renewal of our constitution that the Government are putting into effect. Stage one was the referendums for Scotland and Wales; stage two opens the door to a Greater London authority, which will right the wrong done by the Conservative party in 1986. That party now supports the idea of a mayor, but seeks to deny the need for an assembly. That is no more than a fig leaf to hide the party's conversion and its admission that it was wrong before.

Most of the focus so far has been on the precise wording of the referendum question. I want to focus on part II, which deals with the electoral areas into which London should be divided for the election of assembly members.

London is already divided into 74 constituencies, 32 boroughs, 10 European constituencies and eight postal areas. It is envisaged that the assembly should have between 24 and 32 members. Some will argue that as there are 32 boroughs and up to 32 assembly members the obvious answer is to elect one per borough. Indeed, the Conservative party seems to be moving towards that notion.

It would, however, be a recipe for conflict. As the consultation paper says, it could lead to a focus on local rather than strategic issues. In other words, it could lead to the pork barrel politics mentioned by *The Guardian*, in which the mayor buys the support of assembly members by handing out favours to their boroughs. It could also lead to a conflict of legitimacy between borough leaders and assembly members if they are of different parties—or to duplication if they are of the same party.

The next possibility is to divide London into its 10 Euro-constituencies and to elect three, or thereabouts, from each. It is fair to say, however, that few Londoners have any idea in which European constituency they live. Even political parties that need to work on the Euro-constituency basis face an uphill task in creating any kind of esprit de corps among constituencies thrown together in these rather amorphous conglomerates. Londoners feel that they do not correspond to any natural boundaries.

One of the great mercies of the decision to fight the next European elections on a proportional representation system lies in the fact that the boundary commissioners will no longer have to adjudicate in interminable boundary review inquiries.

The next possibility—in descending order—is the postal area system. Postal areas have the merit of corresponding much more closely to the way Londoners describe where they live. If London were divided into five sectors or zones—north-east, north-west, south-east, south-west and central—that elected five members each, that would yield a fairly compact assembly of 25 members, and it would have the enormous advantage that they represent areas with which Londoners already identify.

The objection might be that such sectors are too large to generate any accountability between the representative and the represented, but in truth any sense of representation has only ever existed at two levels: people go to see their local councillor or their local Member of Parliament. They have never queued up in huge numbers to see their county councillor or their GLC councillor; any more than they queue up—except perhaps in farming constituencies—to see their European Member of Parliament.

These zones would be entirely compatible with electing an assembly on a list system, with each party proposing five candidates and getting one elected for every 20 per cent. of the vote. This is essentially the system that will be used for the European elections in 1999, but it will not have the drawbacks associated with some types of proportional representation—lots of small parties and no party with a majority—because small parties will not be elected under the system. Someone would need a fifth of the votes—or at least more than a sixth—to be sure of winning a seat. There would effectively be a threshold of 17 per cent.

It would however still be quite possible for one party to win a majority in London—

Sir Paul Beresford: The hon. Gentleman is talking as if he still wrote for *The Guardian*, giving us a clear exposition of the whys and wherefores, the pros and cons. Surely they all need to be given to Londoners to vote on. Otherwise the hon. Gentleman's remarks merely serve to confirm the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler). Londoners

must be given the chance to see what they are voting for; the details must not be simply tacked on to the popular idea of electing a mayor.

Mr. Linton: The hon. Gentleman, in turn, talks as though he were still leader of Wandsworth council. But he is missing the point. There is no point in giving the people of London an unrealistic alternative that will not work.

This will be the first time in our history when people have been asked to vote for an executive post. What is different about a vote for a mayor—or a president—is that it is a decisive vote. We can have a hung Parliament or a hung council; we cannot have a hung president or a hung mayor—at least not in the electoral sense. The point is that one individual has to win, so one party has to form an administration.

In any case, the role of the assembly is not to deliver a majority for the mayor, as the Green Paper puts it. The mayor already has the powers needed to run an administration. The main roles of the assembly will be to provide checks and balances, expertise and scrutiny, and to throw out a corrupt mayor if there ever is one. That is why we need both a mayor and an assembly. An assembly without a mayor, as the Liberal Democrats advocate, is a recipe for inertia. A mayor without an assembly, for which the Conservatives argue, is a recipe for sleaze. We need the combination that the Bill offers.

Mr. Ottaway: The mistaken belief is beginning to emerge that the Conservative party does not believe in an assembly. We favour an assembly of borough leaders, not a directly elected assembly. That is quite different from the claim that we do not want an assembly at all.

Mr. Linton: A meeting of borough leaders does not amount to an elected assembly.

Finally, we need to ensure that the referendum campaign is fought fairly. The borough of Wandsworth, of which the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) was once leader, is already spending a large amount of council tax payers' money to produce glossy brochures promoting the Opposition's policy. I accept that Wandsworth is entitled to its view, but neither that borough nor anyone else must be allowed to spend a large amount of money promoting their views in the campaign at the expense of council tax payers.

5.6 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I begin with an apology. Admirers of the Government are continually impressed by the Government's finesse, and the subject of tonight's debate has been tabled on the same night as the Lord Mayor's banquet. Some people have suggested to me that that was prompted by a conspiracy. Generous soul that I am, I assumed that it was more likely to be due to that alternative theory which I cannot utter, since we are still a long way from the watershed and this is a family programme. I do not blame the Government, but they have set me something of a dilemma in that I owe an obligation to my constituents in both regards. I therefore ask for the House's forgiveness if I disappear some time after my speech and read later about how the debate ended.

A great deal of newsprint has been expended on the attitude of the City corporation to the proposals before us. I can say with confidence that the City corporation will work with any new Greater London authority, just as it worked with the GLC in the past.

Some have said—my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) has just done so—that tonight's debate is simply about one question or two. I think that there are some other questions as well, although clearly this is the central one. The Greater London authority of the Bill's title comprises both the elected assembly and the separately elected mayor—although I note that in clause 1(1) they are recounted in that order, not in the order bestowed on them in the schedule specifying the form of the ballot paper. Incidentally, that is an interesting disarrangement.

Remarkably little exegesis was afforded in the Green Paper to the provenance of the mayor, who in an executive capacity is an innovation in our local government constitutional arrangements, so perhaps his or her shallow roots, even in Labour party internal discussion about that before the election, are to be bolstered up by being regarded, not as a free-standing innovation per se, but as a partial element of a Greater London authority, which, at least, the Labour party has asked for throughout the past decade.

That umbrella phrase, however, is also the Government's rationale for the single question, on the ground that one cannot vote for the parts separately if they severally combine to compose the Greater London authority that the referendum asks us to approve. Because of the second rationale, the Government might reasonably have done a better job of explaining in the Green Paper why mayor and assembly must go hand in hand, like Jack and Jill, Crosse and Blackwell or Marks and Spencer—the latter are especially politically apposite, for in death they were not divided and Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer lie side by side in Highgate cemetery.

In a perfect world—although I realise that, especially at this moment, we do not live in one—the White Paper would have been available to inform tonight's debate, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said in his point of order before the debate.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said, the problem with the Green Paper is that many of its 61 questions were contingent on one another. Asking what the relationship should be on specific issues between mayor and assembly or between the authority and the regional development agency is often an empty question unless one constructs the entire scenario to reflect who will be responsible for what. Incidentally, the regional development agency looks like robbing the authority, in the main, of one of the three pillars that were originally postulated to support the logic of an authority.

My unease about these often relatively random questions was exacerbated by the Parkinsonian enthusiasm in the Green Paper for adding further random agenda to the assembly's tasks. I refer to Professor C. Northcote, not to Michael Parkinson—as I read the examples of extra possible topics for the assembly's inquiries, I had a far-off sense of Professor Parkinson's law that

"Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion",

and sensed that the assembly must be found things to do. Initially, therefore, I am left with no clearer idea why the Siamese twins of the present somewhat imprecise conception must necessarily remain bound together.

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

In our original Queen's Speech debate on the constitution on 16 May 1997, I said that the Labour party had done very little detailed preparation, but I surmised that, as Sir Alec Douglas-Home once said in response to a question about VAT, a lot of clever chaps in the civil service were now thinking about it. The Minister—I hope that I do not offend against a confidential exchange between us—assured me in a note afterwards that they were.

My regret is that the product of that thinking has not been more precise on the assembly and whether it will follow present constituency and borough boundaries or take another form—the point which my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield addressed. To proceed to the text of the ballot paper without clarifying that would mystify, not demystify. It is possible to conduct a perfectly sensible debate between Government and Opposition on the nature of the countervailing body to the mayor, but it is difficult to know whether the Government are justified in their authority make-up if we do not know what detailed form their assembly will take.

I illustrate my concern with two local examples. The present study mounted by Westminster city council, "World Squares for All", which was showing in Whitehall last week, envisages that implementation will involve transferring traffic from the very heart of London to elsewhere in central London, including necessarily large parts of my constituency. The Government might sensibly argue that "World Squares for All" is a strategic issue, properly to be determined by the Greater London authority, but my constituents would be deeply troubled if they were to have no direct representation in the assembly to reflect their reaction to the consequences.

Similarly, there is current misgiving—not purely in my constituency but throughout London—about local decisions taken centrally, such as those taken by the London fire and civil defence authority. There would be very similar anxieties if my constituents felt that they would no longer have direct representation in debate about those decisions and at a level no broader than their local authority.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said, imprecision also surrounds how all this will be paid for. I acknowledge the sense of not specifying how it will be paid for until we know how the responsibilities will be carved up—in the Green Paper there is a reference to function—but that emphasises that the referendum cart is being put in front of the Greater London authority horse. In Ernie Bevin's great phrase,

"If you open that Pandora's Box you never know what Trojan 'orses will jump out",

but I doubt that even he would have linked a referendum to it.

The Minister spoke of 1,200 responses to the Green Paper and may feel that that justifies the reference to a great debate which the Green Paper's final paragraph hoped would take place up to 24 October, but my experience of a residents' annual general meeting in Bayswater last Thursday and my expectation of another in Belgravia this Wednesday has been that, at the level of voters—individual Londoners—the atmosphere of the moment is the same as the Pont cartoon in "Punch" early in the last war, in which three intensely placid drinkers in an English pub are listening to a Lord Haw Haw debate being broadcast, and to the words:

"In England the entire population has been thrown into panic."

I said that the Bill prompted other questions. When I woke to hear the result of the Welsh referendum, I wondered whether the Bill that we had passed in the House had allowed for a recount. The 7,000 majority divided by 40 parliamentary seats would have produced an average of 175 per constituency, and I suspect that a returning officer would have granted a recount in such a parliamentary seat. I have, of course, read clause 6 of this Bill, but it seems not to cover the issue of a recount.

Lest the Minister believes that question to be academic, I remind him of the election in which Bill Buckley stood against Mayor Lindsay in New York City—a city which the Minister earlier cited in support of his argument. On national television on the eve of the poll, Bill Buckley was asked what his reaction would be in the unlikely event of his being elected the following day, and he said that he would ask for a recount. There is a touch of the same potential nightmare in the imprecision surrounding the Government's proposals for London.

5.17 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you very much for calling me and allowing me the opportunity finally to make my maiden speech.

I should like, as is the tradition of the House, to pay tribute to my predecessors, for, like many newly arrived Members of the House, I have not one but two predecessors, one of whom, Mr. Greenway, represented most of what is now Ealing, North. Mr. Greenway was an extremely capable and active constituency Member, who made a considerable impression on us in Ealing, North. He was extremely fond of this building and is a frequent—almost daily—visitor to it still, and I believe that the fact that he is always greeted with a smile by old and new friends shows the extent of the amity that he engendered during his time in the House.

In Ealing, North we were also represented by the present right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young)—an extremely hard act to follow. The right hon. Gentleman is still revered—that would not be too strong a word—in parts of my constituency. I am somewhat tired of constantly being told how I compare to the right hon. Gentleman. I am told that he never missed a constituency engagement, and although I swear to constituents that I will haunt the classrooms, church halls and clubs of Ealing, North, that does not satisfy them.

I am constantly told that the right hon. Gentleman presented cups and shields to every sporting group in Pitshanger, and I promise silverware by the truckload. But still they are not happy, no matter how hard I try. Last week, somebody said, "You may do your best, Mr. Pound, but the hon. Member for North-West Hampshire is extremely tall, and one can always see him at functions." I will take second place to no person in my respect for the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire. I admit that he is extremely tall while I am not. Indeed, he towers above me both physically and, it must be said, in the affections of the people of Pitshanger.

Before the two gentlemen that I mentioned, we were fortunate to have Bill Molloy as our Member of Parliament in Ealing, North. Bill—or, as he now insists on being addressed, the right hon. Lord Molloy of Ealing and Greater London, to those of us who are his friends—now sits in the other place but is still a resident of Greenford. He never misses an opportunity to contact his local Member of Parliament—on an hourly basis—and I am grateful for his constant advice and encouragement. I did not respond favourably, however, to the advice for me to resign and have a by-election to allow him to return. Bill Molloy was once described by no less a person than Anthony Crosland as the best speaker in the House and anyone who has spoken after Bill Molloy will know how true that is. Yesterday, at the Greenford Royal British Legion I had the unfortunate task of following Bill Molloy; I would not wish that on anyone.

I realise that it is a convention of the House to introduce one's constituency to hon. Members. I am at a disadvantage because I must admit that there is no such place as Ealing, North. I do not mean that it is some sort of north-west suburban Brigadoon that appears only every 200 or 300 years when the traffic jams at the Target roundabout and the Hanger lane gyratory system are in cosmic alignment, and when the fumes on the A40 part to reveal a Shangri-la on the Himalayan slopes that we Ealingonians call Horsenden hill.

Ealing, North is a mixture of hamlets, towns, villages and communities, bound together by many things—but most of all by the boundary commissioner. It is a proud and glorious mosaic and a wonderful place to live because of the strength of those communities, which cement the mosaic in place. We are a multicultural constituency, and we glory in it. We have a large Irish population; a large and growing Asian population; and the third largest Polish community in the world after Warsaw and Chicago, if only in the number of Poles living in urban conurbations. The Polish people gave us heroic support between 1939 and 1945 and many of those Polish heroes were based at RAF Northolt in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). Ealing, North is as proud today of their contribution as the country was then.

It must be said that, although Ealing, North has a number of buildings, few of them are really great. We have the world headquarters of Glaxo Wellcome, which is a beacon, as the expression goes. We also have the Wharncliffe viaduct, which was built in 1844 with considerable prescience by Sir Isambard Kingdom Brunel for the express purpose of linking Labour constituencies in west London, Reading, Swindon and Bristol. Unfortunately, however, the Wharncliffe viaduct is a few metres south of the constituency. Ealing abbey is a glorious building, but, sadly, it too is on the wrong side of the road.

In the absence of great buildings and great places, I searched for great individuals as some great people must at some stage have lived somewhere in Ealing, North. I have searched; my staff have searched; my children have searched. I conclude that, whereas we may not have great individuals in Ealing, North, we have great people. A few names emerged: Gainsborough's daughters—both of them—were buried, after death, in Hanwell. Sadly, they were carried there from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley). Charlie Chaplin and his brother Sidney lived briefly in Hanwell. They did not care much for it and at the earliest opportunity returned to Bermondsey.

"There must have been someone," I thought, then I found that Vincent Van Gogh taught in a girls' school in Isleworth in the 1880s, while conducting an alliance with a young lady in Rayners lane. As Vincent made his way from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Mr. Keen) to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), he would almost certainly have felt the need to pause for refreshment on his return journey from such an assignation, and where better to pause for a revivifying drink than Greenford? My able researcher examined police records at Greenford police station throughout most of the end of the 19th century. Sadly, according to our records, any number of drunken, bearded impressionists were causing mayhem in Greenford pubs in the 1880s and many of them had parts of their bodily extremities missing.

The search was now getting desperate. Research showed that there may be one way in which Ealing, North stands unique among the 33 boroughs: in June 1889, a giant circus elephant collapsed on Castlebar hill—and died. The great pachyderm, with its last few breaths, bravely staggered forward and is, to this day, to be found beneath the road—unfortunately, just over the constituency border in Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush. I suspect that his last thought was to leave Ealing, North.

In fiction, we are similarly ill-served. One of the finest books written this century, "Brown on Resolution", by C. S. Forester, which sent generations of us into the Royal Navy—we regretted it immediately afterwards—features a young able seaman, Brown, who was the product of a brief liaison between a naval officer and a between-stairs maid who met on the Great Western railway train at Wharncliffe viaduct. One thing led to another and they paused in Ealing. Before the copulatory instinct grew too strong upon them, they sped towards a hotel in central Ealing. Sadly, they ended up in a hotel in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush.

The Nolan sisters attended Cardinal Wiseman high school, which, sadly, is about 3 m outside the constituency boundary. William Perkins, who discovered aniline dyes, may have lived in Greenford. He spent many a night conducting strange chemical experiments. I must say that that habit persists in parts of the constituency to this day, without Perkins' success.

Other hon. Members have been pleased, proud and fortunate in being able to introduce the House to league football clubs in their constituencies. We have none in Ealing, North. We have two senior clubs—Viking FC and Hanwell Town FC, who play in black and white, the same colours as—oddly enough—Fulham FC. Immediately to the south of the constituency, we have Brentford—just outside the constituency but ably managed since last week by Micky Adams, who was formerly the manager at Fulham FC. Just to the east, we have Queens Park Rangers, the club where Ray Wilkins learned the craft that is now coming to flower in his present job at Fulham FC. Slightly to the east we have Chelsea, where young Paul Brooker was on the staff. He, of course, has achieved his full skills and abilities at Fulham FC, where he currently plays.

[Mr. Stephen Pound]

It would be wrong, inappropriate and inexcusable for me as the Member for Ealing, North, to refer constantly to a football club that is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman). I will not do that. In no circumstances will I bring references to Fulham into everything that I say in the House from now on. It may be said, however, that those of us born within sight of Craven Cottage may be described as having black and white blood.

We in Ealing, North may not have been blessed with great individuals and great buildings, but the poet laureate, John Betjeman, did once pause awhile in Ealing and dash off the odd verse. In 1961, describing parts of Ealing, he wrote:

"Where smoothly glides the bicycle
And softly flows the Brent,
And a gentle gale from Perivale
Sends up the hayfield scent."

May I warn hon. Members that if they visit Perivale now in anticipation of the hayfield scent, they may not have that olfactory experience—rather, the heady tang of diesel spillage on the A40 is more likely to assail the senses, but we thank John Betjeman for his thoughts of Ealing.

I come, by a most circuitous route, to the subject that we are debating. As a London councillor, as a Member for a London constituency and as a Londoner born and bred, I have felt an extraordinary sense of anger and frustration at the way in which London in the past 11 years has failed to achieve its potential.

We have seen a dazzling kaleidoscope of quangos run our capital city—a kaleidoscope of quangos that does not delight the eye, but benumbs the brain through their complexity and inefficiency. Any London councillor who has had to deal with a minor traffic issue and found himself or herself negotiating with the Traffic Director for London or with the traffic control signals unit will realise that the case can be made for a Greater London authority on many grounds. The obvious ones are the grounds of democracy and accountability, but most of all on grounds of efficiency, the present system is no way to run a capital city. Any of us who has any part in the governance of this city will know that.

As a result of this evening's decision, I look forward to London entering a new era in local governance. I look forward to our city regaining its rightful place on the world stage. I am so tired, as so many of us are, of the constant reference to what is achieved in Paris, New York and Barcelona, when I know that my city, our city, the city where we are tonight, can achieve all that and more, if it only has that overarching strategic authority that can speak for London and with Londoners and is accountable to Londoners. Then, at last, we will be able to re-enter the world stage at the level that we deserve.

We are a mature enough city and a mature enough electorate to be allowed that democratic right. I am endeavouring to be as uncontroversial as possible in this maiden speech, but I take no lessons from the Opposition when they speak of democracy in our capital city, after they denied us that for 11 years. Many of the comments that I have heard tonight have been cavilling, carping comments aimed more at the minutiae of the Bill than at the principle.

I am addressing the principle that London as a great city, as a capital city, must have a collective purpose and an identifiable leadership. We must have that, and no number of opinion surveys can say different.

I am delighted that tonight we will take the first step back on the road to the city governance that we need. We are not going back to the Greater London council, which was abolished without—unless I have forgotten—any form of referendum, consultation, democratic accountability, discussion or consultation policy, but by a paving Bill, as I recall. We are not going back to the GLC, even though we were told at the time of abolition that all Londoners would save vast sums of money by the abolition of the GLC, and that we would have a lean representative agency representing us.

I do not see many of us swaggering round Greenford lighting cigars with £10 notes with all the money that we have saved from the abolition of the GLC. Far from it: I see constant duplication, confusion and the inability of London councillors and Members of Parliament to manoeuvre between the rocks of the quangos in our city's interests. I do not think that the abolition of the GLC was in London's interests. I did not think so then, and I know that it was not so now.

By agreeing the Bill tonight, we give Londoners the opportunity to vote on their strategic authority. We do not say, "You will do this; you will do that," but we give them the opportunity. We show them the respect that Londoners deserve. We offer them the chance once again to have pride in our capital city, our great city, our London. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.35 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I shall start conventionally by congratulating the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on his turn. He waited patiently for it, but when it came, it was Ealing studios—I do not know which constituency they are in—brought to the House of Commons.

Mr. Pound: Ealing studios are in Ealing, Southall.

Mr. Hughes: I was sure that the studios would not be in the area that the hon. Gentleman represents. I do not know what his pedigree is, and in the light of what he said, it is probably inappropriate to ask, but there may be a bit of the Ezra Pound in him, too. If there are others who, like me—I say this with no disrespect—had never heard of the hon. Gentleman before today, we have now all heard of him and from him, and if he goes on like that, we shall certainly look forward to hearing from him again.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North may not be as tall as the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), the former Secretary of State for Transport, but he is funnier. In politics, there may be many tall people, but sadly, there are far too few funny ones—at least not funny-comic. There are many who are funny in other ways, but that is not a subject for today.

The hon. Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) said that there could be a hung Parliament, a hung council or a hung assembly, but not a hung mayor. To him I say that there could be a balanced Parliament, council or assembly, but there could also be an unbalanced mayor. That is one of the reasons why we should be wary.

I now must register a protest, but I make it clear that I intend no disrespect either to the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) or to the

hon. Member for Ealing, North. The House will not do its job properly if the third party here, with 15 per cent. of the vote, is not called third. That is your choice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and your colleagues' choice, but it is inappropriate for debate that the three different positions are not presented at the beginning of the debate. That is done in another place, and we should do it, too. If we are modernising our procedures, we had better do that soon.

Many people may be asking at the beginning of the debate, "Where is Ken Livingstone?" He is not present, and as he knows as much about this subject as anyone else, we shall want the mystery to be resolved before long. I regret his absence, because the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) has a view shared on both sides of the House that the Government are not right—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows that we do not refer to hon. Members in that way.

Mr. Hughes: That is why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I immediately referred to the hon. Member for Brent, East in his constituency context. The earlier question was in inverted commas. The hon. Gentleman, like many hon. Members on both sides, is concerned not about the general thrust of the Government's policy, but about some of the detail. I hope that, as the Bill proceeds through its stages, we shall hear all voices. I hope that Labour Members who do not share Front Benchers' views will be allowed to vote accordingly. If that occurs, there is at least a chance of the result beginning to reflect the real views of all hon. Members in the House.

Ms Hodge: The hon. Gentleman suggested that there are divisions on Labour Benches on this issue. It is well known that divisions exist within his party as to whether there should be a directly elected mayor for London. If his amendment fails, what will he recommend to his hon. Friends regarding the referendum? Will he recommend that they support the Government on the referendum issue?

Mr. Hughes: That is a perfectly proper question.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is very wrong for an hon. Member to enter the Chamber and pass in front of an hon. Member who is on his feet. I do not expect a response from the hon. Gentleman concerned, but I ask him to remember that ruling in future.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) asks a perfectly proper question, and I shall deal with both parts of it. First, as there is no correct answer to the question of how London should be governed, Labour Members—like other hon. Members—should be free to exercise their differing views. I hope that the hon. Lady supports that principle. I hope that she therefore will not condone any strong-arm tendency aimed at ensuring that all Labour Members vote the same way, regardless of their views, or do not vote if they dissent from the official line.

As to the hon. Lady's second point, I confirm unequivocally that we shall recommend a yes vote. Some regional government is better than none, and some regional government elected by the people is better than none. We have no problem with that. Therefore, I hope that the hon. Lady will participate in the debate with an open mind—as do all Liberal Democrats—and will encourage Ministers to listen to responses to the consultation process and adapt their views accordingly. We remain to be convinced on that score.

The Liberal Democrats are strong advocates of constitutional reform. We support devolution in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and we believe strongly in regional government for England. As part of that policy, we were committed in our manifesto to an elected strategic authority for London. We opposed the destruction of such an authority before, and we support its re-creation now. We believe that it should be as effective and powerful as possible. Power comes from the people, not from Governments; and the civil servants and the appointees who currently wield that power should hand it back to the people at a regional level.

We accept that regional government in England will benefit from a referendum. We believe that it was the settled will of the people of Scotland that they should have devolution, but that is not the case in the regions of England. It would be odd to argue against a referendum in London and then in favour of referendums in Yorkshire or the north-east. We believe that there should be regional government in all the regions of England, but we accept that that is best triggered by referendums. We hope that the Government will not now grow cold on regional government for the other regions just because the Welsh referendum was a close-run thing.

Our reasoned amendment—I share the view of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), who speaks for the Conservative Opposition on this subject—makes it clear that we think that the Government are approaching the issue in the wrong way. The Minister is aware of my views. We should not ask people to give the Government an unsigned cheque and agree to a referendum on an incomplete proposal. We have seen Labour's manifesto commitment and the first set of draft proposals. However, the Government's own description of their proposals is, a "consultation document". The Government have admitted that. I must put it on the record that even if we had not received the White Paper until the spring, we would have ensured the Bill's speedy progress through the House. We would then at least have known what the referendum was about before we voted on the referendum Bill. That is a regrettable constitutional insult, and I hope that it does not happen again.

As to the legislative detail, our reasoned amendment contains some points—the Conservatives made another one—that also raise other questions about the Bill. In large measure, we have no dispute with the Government about the date of the referendum—that is in the Bill. We have no great dispute with the Government about who should be asked the question—that is also in the Bill. However, we have a significant dispute with the Government about the questions that the people of London should be asked; and, to be honest, that is the kernel of the legislation before us.

The Government are right to propose regional government for London, but I regret that they are too timid in two respects. First, the Government are timid in not asking Londoners what sort of government they want; and, secondly, they are timid as to the powers that they are willing to give Londoners.

Mr. Wilkinson: The hon. Gentleman has alluded to regional government in the context of a Greater London

[Mr. Wilkinson]

authority. This legislative proposal is, in effect, a prototype for what, according to the Liberal scheme of things, might pertain to the rest of the country. Would the Liberal Democrats like to see additional income tax imposed on Londoners? That is what the model suggested by his party for regional government elsewhere in the United Kingdom advocates.

Mr. Hughes: That is a perfectly good question, to which I shall return later. For now, the short answer—I do not wish the hon. Gentleman to think that I am avoiding the issue—is that Liberal Democrats do indeed believe that regional government should have tax-varying powers. However, because regional government would receive the proportion of national income that is currently handed from Whitehall to the regions, it would not add to total income tax, but would simply be a proportion of the total tax that would then be collected regionally. It would be part of the whole, the remainder of which would be collected nationally. There need be no net increase in taxation—in fact, there could be less taxation. However, we believe that there should be tax-varying powers, just as there should be in Wales and Scotland. As a postscript, I note that the Government argue that there should be tax-varying powers in Scotland and also state that income tax is the fairest form of taxation. I shall give the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) a free copy of our full proposals, and invite him to read them.

The Liberal Democrats believe that the referendum should comprise at least two questions and that it should confer further powers, particularly regarding post-16 education and national health service regional strategy. It is nonsense to leave NHS planning in London to civil servants once strategic government has been established to run most of the other public services in our capital city.

As to the Minister's response to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow), we believe that Londoners can cope with something other than a "lump it or leave it" option. We think that Londoners can manage two questions. The Minister quoted me as using certain phraseology in a broadcast. I assure him that we can reduce our ideas to simple language, and we shall do so in Committee. If the Scots could manage two questions—which they did perfectly well—Londoners can do so also. It is an insult to imply that they cannot and not to allow them to do so as a result.

The Minister claimed that we have already engendered a great debate on this subject—with respect, I suggest that 1,200 responses is no great debate. During the election campaign, I received thousands of responses to surveys from my constituents alone. If there has been no great debate on the issue, one of the reasons is that people have had no big political options to debate. If there were a choice as to whether the mayor should be elected directly or indirectly, there would be a real debate and public interest would rise. The Minister described the exercise as a new form of local government election. I ask him: please never say that again. It is not local government, but regional government. We should never forget that.

I come now to the Bill's principles and the four key points. The Liberal Democrats offer a simple statement on the principles for regional government. Regional government should produce the appropriate financial and political powers and freedoms at regional level to allow those elected to run this great city of London, and effective accountability to ensure that those powers and freedoms are exercised with responsibility and according to the wishes of Londoners. There is no one theologically correct way of interpreting those principles. It is, therefore, how one applies the principles that counts.

Our first point is: let the people choose both whether to have a mayor and whether to have an assembly. They may prefer the Conservative proposal, put forward by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, they may prefer the Government's proposal, or they may prefer ours, but let the people choose. A regional government structure chosen by the people is much more secure than a structure chosen by one party—a party that will certainly be out of office at some stage in the future, however long it may remain in power for the moment. There is nothing to be afraid of. The people will be able to cope with the questions. If the people make the choice, they take the responsibility, and the Government cannot be blamed for getting it wrong.

Secondly, I ask Ministers even at this stage not to be timid about the powers to be given to the authority. They should allow post-16 education and power over the health service to be handed to regional government. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield admitted what all those in government know—civil servants like hanging on to power. Those in the NHS and the regional outposts of the Department of Health love hanging on to the power to dish out goodies for the local health service. No one in any party is happy that decisions about the strategy of the NHS below Government level are taken by faceless civil servants who cannot be removed. If the people who take such decisions are elected, we can lobby them and argue with them and if we do not like them, we can sack them.

Thirdly, we must have a proportional or fair voting system in London. I was not born believing that there was a particular magic about a particular voting system. London is a cosmopolitan, mixed-race, mixed-language, mixed-community city. As the hon. Member for Ealing, North pointed out, we are a cluster of villages, towns and hamlets—the Kingstons, the Richmonds, the Suttons, the Cheams and the Twickenhams in the south and west and the Barnets, the Hendons and the Clerkenwells in the east and north. There are many, very different places in London. That diversity cannot be properly represented without a fair electoral system. It must be proportional and must allow all shades of opinion to be represented. Proportional representation has been agreed for Scotland, for Wales, for Northern Ireland and for Europe. If we do not have a fair voting system for London, we shall fail the political process. For those who are still sceptical, I am willing to debate separately the merits of different electoral systems for this place and that for local government. Those are different issues. London government is regional government and we must have an appropriate electoral system for this city and this region of ours.

I seriously hope that the White Paper, if it appears before the referendum, will propose that we seek agreement across the Floor of the House on the best electoral system. If the Bill becomes an Act, before the next Bill comes forward, we could achieve a similar agreement in London to that which was achieved in Scotland. We therefore propose today that there should be a constitutional or electoral commission for London with

representatives from all democratically elected parties in London and others who have an interest—unions, management, business, ethnic minorities and other community groups. We must try to agree on a system. If we agree on a system, it will be secure. If we impose one, it could well be thrown out when the Administration is changed.

As a postscript and an example, we are all aware that there will soon be a by-election in Beckenham. The people of Beckenham feel themselves to be partly in Kent, not in London. Liberal Democrats have put forward a proposal that reflects the old counties of London—there is a Kent bit of London, a Surrey bit of London, a Middlesex bit of London, an Essex bit of London and the old central London. That might not be the perfect model, but it might be a good one and we should like to talk to people about it. If our proposal made the people of Beckenham—or anyone else—feel that the authority was more representative of their part of Greater London, it would be worth considering.

Fourthly, I ask the Government not to be timid about tax-varying powers. Of course there can be a levy for this, a bit of a charge here and a bit of a charge for that, but the Government should trust people to do what politicians have always done—going to the people and asking to be elected on the basis of specific, costed proposals. As I said in reply to the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood, the proposals must start from the basis that there will be no extra tax. The cake should be divided nationally and regionally, giving the region the responsibility for raising the money that it spends. I remind hon. Members for London seats that London is a net exporter to the rest of the country of locally collected wealth, not a net importer. There is a fair argument, not just in London but in all parts of the country, that a proportion of what we raise we spend for ourselves. Tax-varying powers may well allow people to be more confident in the merits of this particular political process.

Later, we shall go into other details of the Bill. We look forward to the Committee stage soon. We should have liked to vote on our reasoned amendment, but if we cannot, we shall support the reasoned amendment tabled by the Conservatives. If we lose, we shall seek to amend the Bill in Committee. If we lose in Committee, we shall, none the less, commend a yes vote in the referendum. However, even if this House rejects proposals for more than one question, I do not believe that those in the other place will be as easily dragooned. They may insist on more than one question on the ballot paper. I encourage them to do so. Paradoxically, they are there to protect the constitutional rights of our citizens. I am not a defender of the current structure, but they often need to do that.

Mr. Raynsford: In view of what the hon. Gentleman has said, will he make it clear whether he is advocating two questions in the referendum or more? The way in which he has presented the case for the Liberal Democrats' reasoned amendment implies questions on four issues: mayor; assembly; mayor and assembly; and tax-raising powers. Is he advocating all four?

Mr. Hughes: I do not want to delay the House with a long answer. We want two questions, each allowing the answers yes or no. The first is whether there should be directly elected regional government for London. The second is whether, in addition to an assembly, there should be a directly elected mayor. Other matters can be debated in the Bill next year. I hope that the Committee will agree to two questions. If we do not, I sincerely hope that the other place does. If it does, I hope that the Government then at last accept that it is better to trust the people than to trust the Government.

5.56 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): If other parties amend the Government's legislation in the other place, we should turn that amendment over in this place and go to the people with the mandate that we secured on 1 May. I find it absurd to rely on unelected people in the other place to pursue supposedly democratic means. That is the background to much of the debate.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) mentioned the police, but did not refer to the response to the consultation from the Metropolitan police, which says:

> "The Metropolitan Police Service welcomes the prospect of a Mayor, an elected assembly for London and the consequent formation of a properly constituted police authority."

Like most, if not all, agencies, as well as the business community, the police welcome our proposals. I do not understand what the fuss is about.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) broke down the Welsh vote, saying that it accorded roughly to a majority of 175 in every Welsh constituency. Any number of his former colleagues, who are no longer here, would kill for a majority of 175. He should not be so sniffy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) waited and waited to make his maiden speech. Despite the cajoling, it was well worth waiting for. I am sure that we shall hear considerably more from him.

I do not like the sanctimonious approach and pomposity of minority parties which, having been trounced in the general election, not least in London, try to preach to us about democracy. We said clearly in the manifesto that we would proceed to a referendum on the elected mayor and the assembly—

Mr. Simon Hughes: Not in the manifesto.

Hon. Members: Yes we did.

Mr. McNulty: Indeed, we did. We put our proposals to the people of London on 1 May and secured record support in London for our troubles. Now we are told by the Conservatives, "We want a mayor, but no assembly. We got only 1 million votes compared to Labour's almost 2 million, but that does not matter six months on. That is democratic." We are told by the Liberal Democrats, "We want an assembly, but not a mayor. We got only 600,000 votes compared to Labour's almost 2 million in London, but that does not matter six months on."

It is cant and hypocrisy for the Opposition to talk about democracy. We have had silly little asides from the south-west London colony of Opposition Members about arrogance. The arrogance is for Opposition Members to try to turn over the mandate we secured barely six months ago, which is of substance and matters.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I want to put one matter on the record. I have a copy of the Labour manifesto in front of

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

me. It did, indeed, commit Labour to a referendum and it proposed a directly elected mayor and an assembly, but it said nothing about how many questions would be asked—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] It said nothing about how many questions would be asked, so that point was never addressed.

Mr. McNulty: In all the subsequent discussions throughout the campaign, especially in London, we said clearly that the mayor and the assembly were a single package. The proposals were not a pick-and-mix, a portfolio or ones that people could take some of and not the rest. Far from the proposals being timid, they are radical and previously unheard of in this country, as my hon. Friends have said. Putting the package—not the detail—to the people on 1 May and saying that we would hold a referendum on it, far from being insulting or timid, gives the people of London a voice, far more than would be the case under the Opposition's proposals.

The Leader of the Opposition is acting like a lemming on Europe. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield proved that he was willing to sacrifice his lemmings—what remains of the London Conservative Members—by objecting to our proposals. The proposals were in the manifesto and were clearly attached to a referendum. Everyone knows the extent of the London vote. The two issues are not distinct and were always put together as a package.

The White Paper will be published and there will be greater discussion and debate on the detail between now and the referendum in May. I hope that, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, the Conservatives will engage fully in the debate on the detail and the relationship between the assorted bodies in London when the Bill has been passed. The legislation must be seen in the context of the mandate that we secured on 1 May.

The proposals are supported—there are, of course, minority positions—by the Association of London Government. I accept that the association does not unanimously support the Government's proposals on the specific questions, but it supports the broad sweep. The proposals are also welcomed by the police and the business community in London.

Mr. Pickles: The hon. Gentleman cannot say that there is broad agreement except on the number of questions. Half the borough leaders want two questions and the majority of the people of London want two questions. What is the hon. Gentleman frightened of? Is he frightened of giving the people of London a choice? The people of London will have no choice and he is treating them as if he is a dictator in a banana republic.

Mr. McNulty: I hope that the hon. Gentleman enjoyed that intervention. I will not give way to him again if that is the best he can do.

I was referring to the Association of London Government response, which says:

> "The minority parties . . . favour different models for . . . governance . . . and would wish the ballot paper to contain separate questions on the Mayor and the Assembly."

It is right that the ALG should reflect those views. Happily, the majority on the ALG did not accept those views and, later tonight, the majority in this House will not accept those views.

Ms Hodge: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Opposition's obsession about whether there should be one or two questions simply reflects their unease with the fact that the vast majority of Londoners support our proposals? They do not want to admit that.

Mr. McNulty: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It also seems that, in some quarters, there is a little difficulty with coming to terms with the results in London last May.

Aside from the point raised about the number of questions, many of the points made by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey were appropriate. They were, however, appropriate not to a debate on this Bill, but to discussions once the White Paper is out. I have some concerns, not least about the architecture of London governance after the Greater London assembly and the mayor are in place, about including people and about a strategic scrutiny role for the assembly.

Once we move away from questions about how many questions to the future of London's governance, we can discuss, together with appropriate bodies in London, the interlocking relationship between the boroughs, the Greater London assembly, the mayor and central Government. We must try to get real transparency and clarity in those relationships.

I do not see the creation of an elected mayor and a Greater London assembly as a recipe for conflict, and most of the points made on that have been clichés. People may believe that if they say them often enough, they will gain some substance and meaning. Similarly, we are told that a mayor will open things up to corruption. Why should that be the case any more than it is the case with the leader of a council in whom so much is vested? It does not follow. We are told—these views are offered as truths—that a mayor and an authority together are a recipe for conflict and corruption. That does not figure.

Sooner rather than later, however, there must be a real understanding of the relationship between central Government and local government in London, and of how the GLA and the mayor will fit in between. Some of those who have expressed concern about the matter may have a point. If there is conflict, it will not be enough for the mayor to say, "I am directly elected, I have 5 million votes behind me and I outweigh the Greater London assembly and the London boroughs." That would not be appropriate, any more than it is appropriate for incompetent chief executives to hide behind elected councillors or for local councillors to use their democratic mandate as an excuse for failures, shortcomings and irresponsibility.

Although the democratic mandate affords Members of Parliament, councillors and, eventually, the London mayor rights and responsibilities, it does not make them fireproof and it does not make them anything other than democratically elected people who will be held to account by the people. Too many people hide behind the notion of a democratic mandate to hide their shortcomings and wrong-doings. If we do not get the architecture right, we may be in difficulties, but I believe that it will emerge as the process evolves.

It is the responsibility of all London Members, together with the London boroughs, central Government, the mayor and the new assembly to work out the relationships. No matter whether one has separate questions on the mayor and the assembly or a combined question, those relationships cannot be dealt with when discussing referendum legislation. By definition, they will have to evolve and it is important that discussions begin sooner rather than later.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North said, London Members celebrate the city's rich diversity. When the referendum has been won and we are discussing the detailed mechanisms in respect of the GLA and the mayor, it will be the responsibility of all political parties to make regional London government as inclusive and representative of that diversity as possible. Gender split, ethnic representation and the like are matters for responsible political parties, but we will do ourselves no favours if a 23-member, 30-member or 60-member assembly is dominated by white, middle-class people such as myself—grey men in grey suits. It must reflect the wide diversity in London.

I have other concerns that I will share quite openly. The mayor of London should not be simply a tourist attraction—a mayor for the west end and never mind the rest of London. Nor should the assembly be purely and simply a talking shop for the west end or for what was once inner London. I have been on far too many London Labour party committees—and in the past two or three years the London Planning Advisory Committee—shouting and screaming that the area I represent may be ex-Middlesex, but it is now part of Greater London. Outer London and suburban London should have as much of a voice as inner London in the assembly and in electing the mayor.

Mr. Ottaway: Is not the hon. Gentleman making a very good argument for a constituency-based assembly?

Mr. McNulty: No. The hon. Gentleman has either misheard or misconstrued my remarks. One of the forms of proportional representation may address my concern. I am not saying that Harrow desperately needs its own separate member of the assembly or that the mayor must come from Harrow, in order for Harrow, outer London and suburban London to have a voice.

After three years on the London Planning Advisory Committee, I have come to the view—which, to some extent, is shared by Conservative and Liberal colleagues on that body—that London means London. It does not stop at Hammersmith, Westminster or Newham, and areas such as my constituency are not that nasty little bit before the green belt and the M25. Harrow and the other outer London boroughs deserve a voice within the assembly, and it is for the House—working with the London boroughs, the mayor and the assembly—to ensure that they have more say than has been the case in the quagmire of quangoland that we have inhabited since 1986.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey for mentioning that the Further Education Funding Council is now regionally organised and that planning and strategic considerations are addressed on a regional basis. If, for whatever reason, it is not possible for the mayor and the GLA to take over that function—and the same applies to London's health service—at the very least Londoners should be afforded an exciting and innovative scrutiny role in respect of health and further education. However, the assembly should not be toothless; it should have some clout, and we can talk about that after March and before May.

The role of the FEFC clearly matters to Londoners, not least in terms of the regeneration work of the regional development agency, which will be transferred to the GLA, and economic regeneration more generally. It is daft that there is no Londonwide control of those issues. There is an equal case for strategic scrutiny in terms of London's health service, which also requires consideration.

None of those concerns, however, detracts from the Bill, which is long overdue and seeks to get in motion the whole process of working towards a referendum for the mayor and the assembly. The Conservatives missed the boat in Wales and Scotland, but—to mix metaphors—they can be in the front carriage once the referendum is out the way. By all means, as you will anyway, campaign in the referendum against the one question, but once it is out of the way—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Perhaps I can assist the hon. Gentleman. He has used the term, "you" several times, but I shall not be contesting or opposing anything.

Mr. McNulty: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful for your clarification.

Once the referendum has determined the will of the people of Greater London, I hope that all parties will work together—within the context of our clear mandate on 1 May to provide a democratically elected, directly elected mayor and a Greater London assembly—to reach consensus on the most appropriate strategic governance for London. In the long term, the people of London will be grateful for that and will damn those who put party purposes before the preferences and future of the people of London.

6.15 pm

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): As the first Conservative to speak following the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), may I associate myself and my colleagues with the tributes to that speech? The hon. Gentleman made an entertaining, witty speech, full of humility for his constituency. I have two comments. First, Ealing, North and its new Member have gained in stature as a result of his speech. Secondly, referring to his quotation from John Betjeman, I find Ealing, North today a more attractive place than it was yesteryear, if only because I suffer from hay fever very badly and am therefore reassured that I will no longer smell the scent of the hay if I visit that constituency.

The House will appreciate the hon. Gentleman's tribute to his three predecessors, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) and to the former Members for Ealing, North, Mr. Harry Greenway and Lord Molloy. The fact that I was in the House when Lord Molloy represented Ealing, North is a sign of my advancing years.

Obviously, I should like to mention what I consider to be valid views for consideration in the debate about the Bill. First, I subscribe to the view that there should be

[Sir Sydney Chapman]

two separate questions in the referendum. It may be that, implicitly, the Labour manifesto put the two issues together, but it certainly did not do so explicitly.

Secondly, I should have thought that the Government were great enough to be prepared to listen to people. As I understand it, it was not the Government's original intention to put two separate questions on the Scottish issue, but they decided to do so between the election and the referendum. Therefore, I hope that they will listen to the people of London and reconsider the matter. After all, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) said, widespread support for the two questions ranges from Conservative London boroughs to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). One could not find a wider political spectrum.

Incidentally, my local borough, which is run by a coalition of Labour and the Liberal Democrats, believes that there should be two questions. I also understand that the London trade union representatives agree, as does *The Times*, which I remember as *The London Times*. So, from the carthorse to the thunderer, a great political spectrum supports a two-question referendum. I shall return to that point in respect of another matter at the conclusion of my speech.

A directly elected Greater London authority and a directly elected mayor is a recipe for division and dissension. It need not be, but it almost certainly will be. The reason is very simple. If anybody were directly elected as mayor, they would feel that they had a status which gave them importance and influence. Although they would seek to work with a Greater London authority, the London boroughs or, indeed, with a Government office for London, the fact remains that they would feel that they had a special relationship with the people of London, and would use it to put forward the manifesto on which they were elected. In addition, since an elected mayor of London would be unique in our country, it would further the importance of the office.

I accept that such a problem could be overcome by Greater London authority members—or whatever they will be called—electing the mayor. That would be the better way to go about it. After all, that is exactly what every local authority does at the moment. Successfully elected councillors proceed each year to elect a mayor. Such a process would be much more in tune with the precept and practice of local government.

What I shall say next will certainly not be popular on the Government Benches, but I feel duty bound to say it. London, as we all agree, is a huge and unique city. Thirty-two London boroughs each represent—I think—a minimum of 150,000 people and, at the most, more than 300,000. My borough of Barnet serves a population of more than 300,000. We must therefore consider whether there should be special arrangements for our metropolitan and capital city.

When we considered such arrangements 11 years ago, it was found that there was no need for a Greater London council. Indeed, experience and the activities of the Greater London council led the then Government to believe that a directly elected Greater London authority was not necessary. The main reason was that London boroughs embraced most—but not all—of the powers and responsibilities of local government.

Incidentally, from Labour Members' remarks, the attitude that comes over to Conservative Members is, "We are the masters now; we have won the election and so we can do what we want." [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] I am afraid that it does come over like that. If I remember rightly, the proposal to abolish the GLC was in the Conservative party manifesto for the 1983 election. If I also remember rightly, the Conservatives won a huge majority in the subsequent election. There were certainly many more Conservative Members than Labour Members representing London.

Mr. McDonnell: Following the election in 1983, was there a referendum so that Londoners could have a say about the abolition of the GLC? I doubt whether the hon. Gentleman could recall a referendum taking place.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that there was not a referendum. I am not arguing that there should necessarily be a referendum before setting up the Greater London authority. There was not a referendum before setting up the GLC and, as he said, there was not one before abolishing it. It is his Government who decided, for understandable reasons—I do not quarrel with them—that there should be a referendum. I accept that they are carrying out their party manifesto pledge, but I am arguing that there was no need to pledge a referendum ahead of introducing a Bill.

The most important point is that we should know exactly what is to be set up, how it is to be set up and what it will cost before we ask Londoners to vote in a referendum. I ask the Minister for London and Construction to consider that. He may well respond that there will be a White Paper in March, a few weeks ahead of the referendum on 7 May. I say to that, "Well, there is many a spill betwixt White Paper and Bill." It would be far better if Parliament had the chance to look into the devil of the detail first. Then, when we know exactly what we are to have, we could put the question to Londoners in a referendum. Not to go about the matter in that way is offering Londoners a menu without the prices.

I believe that there is no need for a Greater London authority or a GLC mark II, simply because the boroughs have the resources and capacity in most functions to decide policy—and, as a result, they are able to bring government nearer to the people of London. Where a strategic authority is necessary to deal with certain planning matters, such strategic decisions ought to be taken by the Government, because so many such decisions affect not only Londoners but many people outside London and, indeed, in the south-east as a whole.

As has been pointed out, the Metropolitan police area goes outside the Greater London boundaries. The London Underground system on certain lines goes well beyond the Greater London boundaries. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of commuters come from outside the Greater London boundaries—from Northampton in the north, well beyond Southend in the east, as far south as Brighton and certainly as far west as Reading, if not beyond. So many matters that affect Londoners and London demand consideration far beyond the Greater London area.

The former Greater London council was a recipe for dispute and dissension. I give one example of that: the docklands. Nothing was done in the docklands, despite five London boroughs being involved in its replanning. It

was difficult enough to get all five boroughs to agree. They very rarely did, but even if they did, they did not agree with what the GLC wanted to do. A special agency was formed finally, which has been much more successful in developing that part of our great city.

However carefully the powers of a GLA or an elected mayor are defined, empire building will follow as sure as night follows day. That happened with the GLC and it will most certainly happen with any Greater London authority. There will be plenty of scope for arguing not only with the boroughs but with the Government.

Let us consider what will happen if the Greater London authority is set up. I use as a basis the Minister's speech in July and the Green Paper. For a start, the members themselves and their expenses will give rise to costs. That is certain and nobody will quibble about it. However, in addition, huge costs will arise in employing the staff needed to carry out the scrutiny of the budget, the strategy, and the appointments made by the mayor—as was mentioned by the Minister for London and Construction and in the Green Paper. Costs will also arise from the committees that will be set up, which will resemble giant Select Committees with powers to call for people and papers and to examine London issues. Those committees will produce reports and strategic reviews and will have the power to summon the relevant London organisations before them. The costs that arise will be proper, but significant.

London Members of Parliament should be careful about the exact nature of the proposals if we are to recommend them to our constituents. The Greater London authority could clash with Ministers and their responsibilities and also with the powers of House of Commons Select Committees. That issue should be carefully considered in Committee.

We have been reminded that it is 11 years since the abolition of the GLC and seven years since the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority. I cannot speak on the latter, as I represent an outer London constituency, but my perception of the opinion of the majority of my constituents is that they have felt no significant disadvantage from the lack of the GLC. Feeling may be different in the old London county council area, but my constituents were in favour of the abolition of the GLC and do not hanker for a replacement authority.

Mr. Keith Hill (Streatham): How does the hon. Gentleman known?

Sir Sydney Chapman: I said that that was my perception. We have heard many perceptions and judgments from Labour Members and surely I should be allowed to describe mine. My constituents may vote yes in a referendum, depending on what is asked and how many questions are put, but they will be more likely to vote yes if they do not know the full implications of what they are voting for. I therefore come back to my central point which is that it is in the interests of democracy that the people of London know exactly what they can expect and what they will have to pay before they vote in the referendum.

I believe that there will be dissension and disappointment if a Greater London authority is set up. For example, let us take the issue of town and country planning. When we had the GLC, planning applications were made to the local planning authority—the London borough. That authority said yes or no to the application. The more significant planning applications were sent to the GLC if the local authority said yes. After some months' delay, the GLC said yes or no. The process was pointless if it said yes, because the borough had already said yes. If the GLC said no, the applicant could appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment. It was pointless for the GLC to consider planning matters.

I can understand, but would not agree with, the argument that the Greater London authority should be the recipient of all planning applications for London. That would be more logical because if the authority turned down a planning application, the applicant could appeal to the Secretary of State. However, the arrangement under the GLC regime wasted time and caused more bureaucracy and confusion. It also illustrates the problem that a Greater London authority would have with the Government under a similar system.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): Why should London be different from elsewhere in the country, where the county is the planning authority for the structure plan and the district councils are responsible for the local plans?

Sir Sydney Chapman: London should be different because London is different. In London, the local planning authority is the London borough. I am not an expert on all local authorities outside London, but most local authorities in the counties are smaller, with smaller populations, and do not have the facilities that the big counties have. In London, the 32 London boroughs already have important responsibilities—for example, for education—that local district councils do not have.

The role of the mayor will also give rise to problems. I understand that it is proposed that he or she will set the Greater London authority budget. What size will that budget be? It has also been proposed that he or she should devise strategies and action plans, but he or she would do better to co-ordinate the London boroughs instead. I also do not understand how the mayor and the Greater London authority will fit in with the proposed London development agency, because it is proposed that the agency should be separate from the authority.

I wish to raise four more detailed points covering various aspects of the Bill. They can be more properly discussed in Committee, but I wish to give the Minister the opportunity to consider them now, because they are of more than pedantic importance. The first concerns clause 2. Resident European Union nationals will, I understand, for the first time, be able to vote in the local elections next May. Will they therefore be able to vote in the referendum?

Secondly, on clause 3, will the result of the referendum be announced on a ward-by-ward basis or a borough-by-borough basis, or will it be announced only as a result without any breakdowns?

Thirdly, on clause 4, will there be two ballot boxes in each polling station—one for the London borough elections and the other for the referendum—or will all the ballot papers be put in one box? *[Interruption.]* That may seem like a pedantic point, but it is important for the time of the announcement of the result. Fourthly, if all the papers are to be put into one box, how will they be counted and checked? Those are important questions to people interested in the issue and to those who will be responsible for administering the referendum.

[Sir Sydney Chapman]

Fourthly, and finally, the Minister was good enough to allow me to intervene in his speech, on the question of the referendum. I advocate two separate questions, but—whether we have two or one—the word "directly" should be inserted before "elected mayor" and between "separately" and "elected assembly" in the question proposed in the schedule to the Bill. Under the form of words for the ballot paper proposed by the Bill—if there is to be one question—it will be possible to vote yes if one wants a directly elected London authority but not a directly elected mayor. The ballot, according to the schedule, says that the authority will be

"made up of an elected mayor and a separately elected assembly".

Following from the election for an assembly, the ballot question could be such as to allow the assembly—not the electorate—to choose the mayor. That would change the Government's present intention dramatically.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I apologise for raising intricate questions at this stage, but I believe that they are of such importance that Ministers need to be aware of them before the Committee stage.

6.39 pm

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech. It is a great honour to be elected to represent and serve the people of Wimbledon. Wimbledon, like London—of which it forms an integral part—has an international reputation and a strong sense of identity and civic pride. It is also my home town. I was born in Wimbledon, I live in Wimbledon and I went to school in Wimbledon, and it is a great privilege to be elected to serve the community of which I am a part.

It is with particular pride that I address the House as the Labour Member for Wimbledon. Indeed, I am only the second Labour Member of Parliament in the history of my home town. My predecessor, Mr. Arthur Palmer, was first elected to this House in the Labour landslide victory of 1945. When Arthur Palmer made his maiden speech, the Government faced a great challenge in rebuilding our nation in the aftermath of war. Once again, my party has the task of rebuilding this nation, and restoring belief in public services and in government for the many, and not the few.

I am pleased that the Government have also moved with such urgency to rebuild this city and, as a first step, to restore a Greater London authority. The achievements of the Labour Government to which my predecessor Arthur Palmer was elected—providing security for all in the post-war era—will be a continuing inspiration for the new and reforming Government. In Wimbledon—just as Arthur Palmer did—I aim to represent and serve all my constituents, as the Government will govern in the interests of the nation as a whole. Arthur Palmer said that a Member of Parliament is not a spokesperson for one party or faction within a community, but a servant of all his constituents.

In keeping with the traditions of the House, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Charles Goodson-Wickes. He made his maiden speech on the valuable contribution of voluntary organisations to community life in Wimbledon, and I whole-heartedly share that view. I also wish to pay tribute to the work of Cyril Black, a long-standing Member of Parliament and friend and representative of Wimbledon. Cyril Black realised, as I do, that a Member of Parliament has an important civic role in the community. He spoke always in the interests of the people of Wimbledon, nurturing in the process our sense of community, identity and civic pride which is still a prominent feature of the town today.

I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), whose work as leader of Merton council in many ways paved the ground for my success by demonstrating that the values of modern Labour could resonate with people in formerly Conservative areas such as Wimbledon to the point where they can give us their trust.

Wimbledon is justly proud of its sense of history and tradition. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) mentioned Highgate cemetery, where Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer are buried. I am glad to say that, unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), we have some fine alumni from Wimbledon, including the author Robert Graves, who was born in Wimbledon, and William Wilberforce, who lived there and fought for the abolition of the slave trade. It was also home to William Morris, and the Merton Abbey mills are still a feature of Wimbledon today.

Today, Wimbledon is home to the internationally famous All England club, but I wish to remind the House that we also have a successful Premiership football team. If we were able to return the team to a ground within the constituency, we might even lay claim, with our tennis and football, to being the sports capital of London. Wimbledon also sports a great deal of religious and cultural diversity, and this reflects the diversity of our life as part of the city of London. Wimbledon is home to the papal envoy and has a strong Roman Catholic contingent. There are more than 30 churches of all denominations, and we are blessed with a synagogue and two mosques. This religious diversity reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of Wimbledon and I am proud to represent that diversity in the House. I speak for everyone in the constituency, regardless of religion, creed or race.

In the arts, Wimbledon's reputation has been further enhanced by the well-known Wimbledon theatre, but also—and importantly—by the unique achievements of the Polka international children's theatre.

Finally, many community and voluntary organisations help to develop and sustain valuable community partnerships in the town, and Merton council has taken a leading role in setting up such partnerships. The Abbey partnership policing initiative has made the streets safer and reduced the fear of crime. Working in partnership with magistrates, the probation service, the local police and the council, the initiative has become a flagship project which has been visited by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary as well as his predecessor.

Those local partnerships allow me to work towards delivering my promise to the people of Wimbledon—and help the new Government deliver their promises. However, we cannot achieve this alone; we can achieve it only by working, for example, in partnership with local schools and the council. I repeat my promise to the people of Wimbledon; the new deal for Britain will mean a fair deal for Wimbledon. In all the ways I have outlined,

Wimbledon contributes to the diversity, energy and huge resourcefulness of London. I am proud to have the opportunity to give voice to all that Wimbledon has to offer our city and our nation in these respects. A Greater London assembly and mayor will strengthen the strong bond that Wimbledon already has with London and will give its people the chance to meet many challenges that we cannot tackle by local partnerships alone.

The assembly promises an integrated transport strategy that will ease the lives of the 17,000 commuters who travel to London from Wimbledon every day. It will provide a framework for planning the traffic flows and urban developments that so deeply affect the lives of people in our town. It will create a pathway to sustainable economic and environmental development that will impact directly on my constituents' quality of life.

For all those reasons, I welcome the Government's initiative to establish a strategic authority for London, with the consent of the people of London. On 1 May, people in my constituency delivered one of the largest swings in the country, to give Wimbledon a voice. I am confident that in May next year Wimbledon will vote as resoundingly for an assembly and mayor, so that London, of which we in Wimbledon feel so much a part, from which we have so much to learn, to which we have so much to contribute, and from membership of which we have so much to gain, may once more have a voice.

I welcome the Government's proposals to give the people of Wimbledon the opportunity to vote for the assembly and the mayor.

6.50 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I am most grateful to have this opportunity to address the House for the first time. I want first to congratulate the hon. Members for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) and for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on their maiden speeches. We look forward to many similar performances and may have to indulge the occasional rally from the hon. Member for Wimbledon.

Having heard two maiden speeches from Members elected on 1 May, hon. Members might consider that I am acting with unseemly haste in making mine. In my defence, the long gap between my election and the return of the House after the long summer recess has given me a somewhat uncharacteristic impatience. Having been variously described in the by-election campaign as a Dickensian mill owner, a scaled-up version of a garden gnome, a bearded non-entity, Forrest Gump and the missing link, I feel that I am under no illusions as to what Westminster politics is all about.

I am immensely proud to represent the people of Uxbridge, but my feelings are mixed with sadness. I am sure that hon. Members of all parties will want to join me in paying tribute to my predecessor, the late Sir Michael Shersby. He was a most respected Member of Parliament. He surprised the pundits 25 years ago by winning a by-election against the prevailing political tide. From that moment on, until his untimely death in May, he served all his constituents in a faultless manner.

Sir Michael was immensely respected in Uxbridge and known for his sense of devotion and fairness. He was well thought of by hon. Members of all parties. On the day of his death there was a tangible sense of loss throughout the Uxbridge constituency. I had the privilege of serving him as constituency chairman and election agent on 1 May, and as I embark on my career here I miss his kind guiding hand and words of wisdom. The House, Uxbridge, and the country that he loved so much, are the poorer today.

I share the great pride in my constituency that Sir Michael always had. For me, as for him, it is and always has been home. Yesterday, as I stood at the war memorial in Uxbridge listening to the last post being sounded by a lone Royal Air Force bugler, I was once more reminded of the close links between our town and the RAF. Next year is the 80th anniversary of the establishment of RAF Uxbridge. Much of the Battle of Britain was conducted from the bunker at RAF Uxbridge, and there Sir Winston Churchill first spoke of "the few".

RAF Uxbridge is home to the Central Band and the Queen's Colour Squadron of the RAF Regiment, both units being renowned around the world. The service men and women are an integral part of the local economy. This year is the bicentenary of the formation of the Uxbridge Yeomanry. I am pleased that it is once more back in town as the Middlesex Yeomanry.

The Uxbridge Yeomanry was often called on for escort duty on royal journeys. In 1834, it escorted the sovereign on part of his journey between Windsor and Moor Park. Having successfully completed the first half of the duty, the Yeomen were liberally entertained while awaiting the return leg. In high spirits, they set off, got lost, and took the king into a ploughed field. I can assure the House that today the Yeomanry is a professional body of men and women.

The constituency is of course made up of more than Uxbridge town. It is a collection of communities: Ickenham, Cowley, Hillingdon, Colham, Yiewsley and West Drayton. Once villages, they retain today a great deal of their individual characters; but as London's boundaries have advanced, the distinctions have become slightly less well marked. Although essentially in suburbia, or metroland, many of us still consider that we live in Middlesex, rather than west London, but we are of course in Greater London, and Uxbridge football club currently holds the London Football Association challenge cup. Labour Members will no doubt be pleased to know that I am a Reds supporter.

We are a forward-looking area. We have the immensely successful and world-renowned Brunel university and science park in the constituency, as well as many fine schools. All but one of the secondary schools are grant maintained, and I believe that they are living proof of the success of the GM system.

The environment is precious to us and over the years many people have chosen to live in the constituency because of its open spaces and the sense of being in neither country nor city. We have several nature reserves. Muntjac deer graze within half a mile of Uxbridge town centre, and we have important colonies of both great crested newts and glow-worms, and much interesting bird life. Hon. Members will no doubt discover with time that wildlife and conservation hold a special interest for me, and I hope that they will also find in me as stout a defender of the green belt as my predecessor was.

I apologise to the House for indulging myself in extolling the constituency's merits, especially as I appreciate the fact that many hon. Members had the pleasure of visiting the constituency back in those balmy days in July. I thank them all for their great interest.

[Mr. John Randall]

I want to thank the Prime Minister, in particular, for sparing some of his valuable time to visit both Uxbridge and Yiewsley. For many of us, his personal appearance was a great morale boost. Speaking personally, I can honestly say that his visit was the icing on the cake and made the summer all the sweeter. I am a little worried, however, that other constituencies might feel somewhat jealous if we in Uxbridge alone have this great honour, so I strongly urge the Prime Minister to visit Beckenham and Winchester, so as not to be seen to have treated Uxbridge with undue favouritism.

London's importance and significance are beyond question. That is why Conservative Members recognise the need for London to have its own voice. We think that that should be through a directly elected mayor, who would be responsible for cross-London issues, such as transport, traffic and environmental matters. The mayor could work with all the London borough council leaders, using their collective experience in formulating Londonwide policy; they would have the experience and knowledge of what would work on the ground and could act as an advisory board to the mayor.

The problem with the Bill is that it lumps together the election of a mayor with that of an assembly, denying Londoners the chance to vote in favour of one without the other. The issues should be properly debated. It is legitimate to support various different permutations regarding the future of London government.

If democratic legitimacy is to be conferred on the future government structure, a two-question referendum is the proper way forward.

The Government recognised that need for two separate questions in the devolution referendum in Scotland. If they saw the need for two questions in Scotland, why not give the people of London that choice? Creating an assembly and a mayor offers the prospect of institutionalised conflict between the two, as well as clashes with the boroughs. The one question proposed in the Bill will prevent that view from being advanced without rejecting the entire package that is on offer. The Bill does not allow a choice to be made between either a mayor or an assembly, or having both.

The Green Paper proposes an entirely new structure for the government of London. The Bill as it stands offers Londoners an all-or-nothing choice. It is only right, therefore, that two questions should be put on the ballot paper. That would give Londoners a real choice over their future. Surely it is not too much to ask.

6.59 pm

Mr. Stephen Twigg (Enfield, Southgate): It is a great pleasure to speak after the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). As he said, many of us—I imagine almost all the Labour Members here—had the pleasure of visiting what is now his constituency during the by-election campaign in July. I have a particular pleasure in congratulating him on his maiden speech because I also represent a constituency where many people feel that they are a part of Middlesex, and also which is at the end of the Piccadilly line although I am at the other end. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his speech. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), who gave a characteristically witty maiden speech, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) on a thoughtful and intelligent maiden speech.

The manifesto on which the Labour party won the election on 1 May included an ambitious programme of democratic and constitutional reform. As my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) said, this is the next stage of a long and comprehensive programme of change—a programme that is designed to modernise our democracy and to rebuild a sense of faith and trust in the political process, to challenge the secrecy and lack of accountability that have for too long characterised British democracy. That is why we are committed to devolution, to incorporating the European convention on human rights into British law, to freedom of information, to study electoral reform and to reform the Houses of Parliament. Where we are proposing measures of great constitutional significance, we are proposing to put those measures to the people in a referendum. As has been said, we have had the referendums in Scotland and Wales. We shall have a referendum on proposals for voting reform for the election of the House and today we are discussing the proposed referendum for the Greater London assembly and mayor.

Like most hon. Members who have spoken, I have particular pleasure in supporting the Bill because I am a Londoner. I was born and bred in outer London, in the constituency that I have the privilege to represent; I have also lived and served as an elected Labour councillor in inner London. From both perspectives, I see the strong case for the change that the Government propose to introduce.

One of my earliest political memories is of the campaign against the abolition of the Greater London council. It has been instructive in preparing for this speech to look at the Second Reading debate 13 years ago and contrast the actions of the then Conservative Government—like our Government, they had a large majority—with those of the present Government.

Today, we have had more than 1,000 responses to a Government Green Paper—responses which are overwhelmingly positive about what is being proposed. In 1984, there were 800 responses, of which 95 per cent. were hostile to what was being proposed by the then Conservative Government. In 1984, we had a Government with a three-figure majority relying solely on the fact that they had a manifesto commitment to put through the changes that they wanted to make in Greater London. Today, we have a Government with a three-figure majority who are proposing to put their manifesto pledge to the people in a referendum next May. If we are to believe the opinion polls, we have a Government whose proposals for Greater London are supported by 80 per cent. of Londoners. The 1984 proposals were rejected by 74 per cent. in the opinion polls at the time.

The shadow Defence Secretary, who has been mentioned in the debate—the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young)—was then a Minister at the Department of the Environment. On 4 December 1984, he said:

"the rash commitments that Labour Members have made about exhuming the dinosaurs and putting them on a life support machine will be a source of grave embarrassment to them and to their party because people will have seen that those bodies were irrelevant, unnecessary and extravagant and a party that pledges to bring them back will have disastrous election results."—[*Official Report*, 4 December 1984; Vol. 69, c. 291.]

We scarcely had a disastrous election result on 1 May.

I welcome the presence in the Chamber of the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), who spoke on the same subject and sounded a note of caution when he said:

"I suspect that the Government"—

the then Conservative Government—

"with their very big majority, may succeed in laying the body politic of the Greater London Council to rest, but I fear that its spectre will rise to haunt us."—[*Official Report*, 10 December 1984; Vol. 69, c. 857.]

The spectre that is rising today, so ably predicted by the hon. Gentleman 13 years ago, is the spectre of the desire of the overwhelming majority of the people of London to have a democratic voice for our capital city.

I welcome the fact that the Conservative party is slowly coming round to our point of view on this issue. The party is now in favour of the mayor, but not of the assembly. It is halfway there. I welcome the conversion on the proposal for a mayor. Unlike the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I think that a directly elected mayor is an exciting democratic innovation. We can have someone who will be an ambassador and a champion for the people of Greater London, providing real leadership for our capital city and making a difference to people's lives in London.

I want a mayor who can get things done and who will have real power, but that mayor has to be accountable—accountable to a strategic assembly. That is why the Government's proposals have to be treated as a package and why the Opposition are wrong to propose a mayor alone and to propose that we have two separate referendum questions. Conservative policy is shifting even on the matter of referendums, however, in the direction of the Government Benches. In June, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who was then speaking from the Conservative Front Bench, advocated a total of four referendum questions. Today, we hear that the Conservative party is in favour of two questions. Perhaps by Christmas they will have accepted the Government's approach—that a single question should be put to the people of London.

I recognise from the contribution of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey that there are those who are genuinely concerned and who are putting a genuine case for two questions. In response I must ask, "Why those two questions?" We have already seen confusion on the Liberal Democrat Benches today. The original amendment, which has not been selected, advocated three referendum questions. The Liberal Democrats now advocate two. A number of important issues need to be addressed. The Government have issued a Green Paper that has 61 different questions for consultation. We can separate out many issues, such as the question of revenue-raising powers, which the hon. Gentleman, among others, mentioned, the question about policing raised by other Opposition Members and questions about the electoral system—both for the mayor and the assembly. Many different questions could be addressed in a referendum.

The very nature of the manifesto commitment that we put to the people, including the people of Greater London, was of a package with a mayor and an assembly working together. If there is not a mayor, the assembly will be very different. By definition, the sort of package outlined in the Green Paper rests on the idea that there is a separation of powers between a mayor and an assembly. The nature of the mayor and of the assembly on which we have consulted the people and organisations of Greater London is one in which the two exist side by side.

In a previous debate in June, Labour Members were accused of manifesto-itis. I do not think that it is manifesto-itis for us to contend that the best way of implementing the commitment that we gave the people of London on 1 May is to have a single question. We will have a referendum on the principle of what the Government propose, and Parliament will have the opportunity after that to deliberate on the detail. That is the best way forward.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman puts a perfectly reasonable case, and I accept his good faith. I hope that he accepts that the argument—put differently by different parties—for having two questions on the central issue of structure is that the proposal in the Labour manifesto concerned the structure. The structure includes the novelty of a directly elected mayor. Matters such as tax-varying powers can be dealt with when we examine the Bill next year. Those views are put in equally good faith and I am sure that he accepts that there is an equally valid argument for them and for having two questions rather than one.

Mr. Twigg: I respect that, but the Liberal Democrat reasoned amendment suggested that three areas could be the subject for questions. The hon. Gentleman has, in good faith, argued that revenue-raising powers for the assembly are a major question that could be put to the people in a referendum. We must strike a balance. In Britain, the referendum is a constitutional novelty: it is not a device used often and we are still feeling our way. It is better to have had a proper debate in the run-up to the general election, which is what started the Green Paper process, continuing through to the publication of the White Paper in the spring. We shall then have a vote on the principle of what the Government seek, and assuming a yes vote, we can then have a full and proper deliberative discussion in this House and in the other place on the legislation.

I warmly welcome the new approach outlined in the Green Paper to the governance of our capital city. It is based on the principles of partnership, participation and building consensus. If the Greater London authority is to succeed, it must seek to involve and consult all the interests that make up our great capital city. In the consultation process, the importance of the voice of business and industry in London being heard loud and clear was frequently raised, building on the excellent work of organisations such as London First and the London Pride partnership.

Finally, but most important, it is vital that the assembly and the mayor enjoy democratic legitimacy. They must be a genuine democratic voice for the people of London. I should be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London could tell us in her reply, in so far as she can, about the broad responses of individuals and organisations to questions about electoral issues and, in particular, how the mayor and assembly will be elected. There is widespread concern in all parties on that. On this, I agree with the remarks of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey. It is crucial that both

[Mr. Twigg]

the mayor and the assembly enjoy democratic credibility. That means that the mayor must have the clear support of a majority of those voting. The best way to achieve that is the alternative vote system. That must mean an assembly based on fair voting principles. We cannot have an assembly dominated by any one party, even my own. I hope and trust that the Government will listen to the concerns of people of all parties and none, and will adopt a system that will deliver the democratic and reasonable outcomes that I mentioned.

Democratic reform lies at the heart of the new politics that the new Government are seeking to promote. The manifesto promise of the Labour party to the people of London was clear and unequivocal. I welcome the Bill because it takes a major stride towards fulfilling that manifesto pledge and restoring a democratic voice to the people of London. For that reason, I commend it to the House.

7.13 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): It is difficult to do justice to the important theme that is fundamental to this debate after a maiden speech of such eloquence as that of the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) and after the memorable maiden speeches of the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). I hope that the hon. Member for Wimbledon will not regard it as invidious if I do not follow his remarks but concentrate on those of my two geographic parliamentary neighbours.

I was delighted that the hon. Member for Ealing, North mentioned the gallant Poles, many of whom reside in his constituency, who fought at RAF Northolt and helped to win the battle of Britain. It is appropriate that he should have commemorated them on Remembrance day eve, as it was appropriate for my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge to remind us that the headquarters of 11 Group RAF Uxbridge, which was commanded by Air Vice-Marshal Park, was at the heart of the Battle of Britain. The continuing service that the Royal Air Force provides our country, and the contribution that it makes to the borough of Hillingdon—where we both have the honour of serving as Members of Parliament—is treasured by all the people of Hillingdon.

Hon. Members will have been struck by the sturdy and admirable qualities of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge, which made him such a worthy winner of the by-election: his commitment to local people, the love of his country and his warm appreciation, which we all shared, of his fine predecessor, Sir Michael Shersby, who so sadly died almost immediately after the general election in which my hon. Friend played such a crucial part as his constituency chairman and agent.

I found it surprising that the Minister did not mention two issues that, for my outer London constituents at least, are at the forefront of their local concerns: public transport and the environment, about which my constituents and those of my hon. Friend for Uxbridge care most profoundly. Perhaps it was understandable that the Minister did not mention public transport. On the doorstep, Labour canvassers said that come 2 May, were we to have a Labour Government, the London Underground system would be put right, there would soon be a directly elected London assembly and mayor responsible for it and the delays, constant fare rises above the level of inflation and inadequacies of the system would be addressed. We wait and see. All that I and my constituents know is that fares are to rise by well above the rate of inflation in the new year, the Government have announced no concrete plans to improve the London Underground transport system, and there are no concrete proposals about exactly how the mayor and the directly elected assembly are going to work hand in glove with the new investors in the system, if there are any, or with the Department of Transport, if it is to have a residual oversight role.

On the environment, there is a constant battle throughout London to preserve the few open spaces and patches of green belt that remain. In my constituency, as in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge, there has been a malign campaign by the socialist local authority—I say socialist advisedly, because that is how it behaves—to build social housing in areas that are utterly inappropriate for residential development and against the wishes of, I would say, 99.9 per cent. of local residents.

The Greater London assembly, if it is elected, is to have responsibility for structure plans that will set the overall pattern within which the development of Greater London is to take place, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) made clear so admirably, it is uncertain how planning issues will be resolved.

We know from the consultation document that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions will have ultimate appellate powers, but will the Greater London assembly arrogate to itself functions beyond structure plans? Will it, too, want to supervise and second-guess the judgments of the boroughs? Will the playing fields, public open spaces and the few patches of green belt that remain be better preserved under the Greater London assembly than they are today or not? That is what my constituents want to know, and they have their doubts because they remember what life was like under the GLC.

Mr. Raynsford: If the hon. Gentleman looks at *Hansard* tomorrow, he will see that I referred to transport and the environment. I would not want him to think that I did not refer to those issues. I assure him that the Government are utterly committed to protecting green spaces, particularly in the urban area where they are so precious. We are also committed to improving the public transport system to ensure that there is a better service for the people of London.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am grateful to the Minister. Perhaps those references were so cursory that they passed me by, or perhaps I was inattentive. I will take heart particularly if his Department will, as a consequence of his expression of good will, postpone the planning inquiry into the proposed Field End road recreation ground development from 6 to 9 January to a date more convenient to my constituents in March. I should be grateful if the Minister could consider that.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) referred to a speech of mine on the Local Government Bill, which abolished the GLC. I hate to quote my own

speeches, but it is important to do so because, then, I urged my party to be utterly democratic in its approach. I urge it to be just the same today. If the referendum so decides that there should be a directly elected assembly, I would wish our party whole-heartedly to embrace it.

On Third Reading of the Local Government Bill, I voted against my Government because I thought that there was a need for some streamlined overall, elected, strategic authority for London. I asked:

"why should this party"—

the Conservative party—

"be afraid of democracy and of the ballot box?"—[*Official Report*, 28 March 1985; Vol. 76, c. 751.]

There should be a directly elected, strategic assembly for London. I do not believe that delegated representatives of the London boroughs are the right people to fulfil that overall strategic function in support of the mayor. Why do I think that? For party political reasons, I believe that the Conservative party should be embracing whole-heartedly every opportunity to field candidates against the Government. It is by winning elections at every level—and by demonstrating, after we have won a few, that Conservative candidates are the ones to be trusted to look after their constituents' interests, not to waste people's money, and to work harmoniously at every level—that the Conservative party will win back support. It is by a proven track record of democratic success that we will steadily gain to the point whereby the party restores itself and regains power at national level.

One must recognise that borough leaders or senior members of borough councils are extremely busy individuals. Their time is fully occupied meeting their responsibilities on behalf of their borough electorates. I do not believe that they would have the time to go to Westminster guildhall or wherever the new assembly may be located. They should be doing their own job for their constituents in their own boroughs. One should also remember that they are part-time councillors with professions of their own; they have other things to do rather than spend their whole time in traffic jams or on the tube travelling to London assembly meetings.

I speak personally when I say that we should support a directly elected assembly. How should that assembly be constituted? I suggest that it should be based on 32 or 33 seats, including the City of London—32 is one of the numbers postulated in the consultation paper, and there are 32 London boroughs. I would have one representative per borough because a territorial connection is at the heart of our democracy in this country. On a strategic authority we need to have representatives who will fight for the interests of their local electorates. That is what truly counts.

The Minister spoke about accountability. Elected representatives are brought to account if constituents know who their representatives are and recognise that those representatives are fighting for the things that they, the voters, care about. The trouble is that what the Government propose is all part of their greater scheme for constitutional change. The mayoralty is not the normal British kind of mayor; the example cited by the Minister was that of New York.

The consultation document poses the question,

"What would the Mayor and Assembly do?"

According to that document, the mayor must be modern. I am not quite sure what it means—perhaps that the person should be without flummery and trappings. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) and I know, however, that the mayor of the City of London does a first-rate job as a traditional mayor. He travels the world on behalf of the City and corporation of London and he is invaluable in reinforcing its role as the financial centre of the world.

My fear for the mayoralty of Greater London is that it will be a platform for a big ego rather than the kind of office to which a public servant who is more dedicated to the traditions of municipal service might aspire. There must be a careful balance between the need to create an image for London as a whole—which will promote it as a centre of investment and enterprise—and excessive posturing, publicity seeking and personal photo opportunities, and so on.

According to the slimmed-down consultation document, the mayor should "make things happen". The GLC made things happen and it spent an awful lot of money on all sorts of weird activities that were way outside its remit as a London assembly. It encouraged many kinds of third-world activities. Unless the powers of the mayoralty are closely drawn, that kind of extravagance could happen again.

That is why I believe that it is important that the mayor should be kept under control by a directly elected assembly, elected by a system which our people comprehend and with which they are familiar. Instead, in all likelihood, the Government are proposing, if the Local Government Commission does the work of which the Liberals would approve, a system much more akin to the model for the European Parliament. It is all part of the exercise to change the fundamental governance of our country in line with European practices. That would thereby diminish the traditional authority of Parliament and the elected Government of the United Kingdom. As the Liberal spokesman, the hon Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has said, the idea of an assembly and a mayor is a prototype, part of the greater design for regional government for England. We Londoners would be used as guinea pigs in an expensive experiment in constitutional change of a dangerous sort.

I turn to the question of timing—in politics, timing is all, and it is significant to analyse why the Labour Government want to hold the referendum on the same day as the local government elections. I suspect that the first reason is that they wish to maximise turnout. In a referendum of such significance as this one, there ought to be a qualifying majority, just as there is in normal referendums involving constitutional change. It was, of course, on the matter of a qualifying majority that the referendums for devolution in Scotland and in Wales failed in the late 1970s, at the end of the Callaghan Government: the turnout did not meet the qualifying figure. After what happened in Wales, where only 25 per cent. of the electorate voted for a devolved Assembly, it is little wonder that the Labour Government do not want a qualifying majority for the London referendum.

We are to have a referendum campaign that is coterminous with the local election campaign in London. Local elections are of the greatest importance to Londoners, in that they happen only once every four years. In other parts of the country subject to district councils, a third of the council is turned over every year and there are various other systems; but in London those elections happen every four years.

[Mr. Wilkinson]

Londoners—certainly my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge—want good, responsible governance at local level. That is what really interests them, which is why on not a single doorstep during the election campaign did any elector complain to me that there was no Greater London authority in existence, or that Greater London lacked a mayor. What they did complain about was the scandalous waste and extravagance of the socialist borough council and the way it was running roughshod over local people's opinions and building over green belt land.

In short, what the Government are proposing in this shoddy Bill is the biggest municipal blank cheque in history. It should not be approved.

7.32 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): I congratulate the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches in this debate. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) for having given me the opportunity to acquaint myself with large areas of his constituency during the wettest July since 1853. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) on making a speech that demonstrated his commitment to his constituency—the scale of our victory there showed the strength of support for our policies in London, as in Britain as a whole.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), who played an absolute blinder of a maiden speech. It showed the warped humour and affection for his constituency that we associate with him. My name is a gift to punsters—I wish I had a pound for every time there was a newspaper headline saying "The Buck Stops Here" or "The Buck Starts Here"—but my hon. Friend is in a class of his own. It is alleged that pinned to a noticeboard in his office there is a news cutting carrying the words "Blair Rattled by Pound's Strength". That might not have been true yesterday, but I am sure it is today.

I have great pleasure in supporting the Bill, which represents a massive extension of democracy in London. I am staggered by the hypocrisy of some Conservative Members who have argued against the referendum, saying that the nature of the question means that it is a challenge to democracy, when in 1986 the wishes of Londoners were brushed aside so casually. I look forward with great excitement to the campaign for a yes vote in May. We will give Londoners what they want: a voice for the capital, dynamic leadership and effective scrutiny of the decisions and policies that affect us. It will be the different, but complementary, roles of the mayor and the Greater London authority that will deliver those aims; and it is because those roles are so complementary that it is necessary that we put a single, simple question to Londoners.

I derive a certain personal pleasure from speaking in the debate, because it was Dame Shirley Porter's Westminster council that led the campaign for the abolition of the Greater London council. I now represent part of Westminster and am able to give a voice to those who opposed the abolition of the GLC then and who now want the return of a single London authority. I disagree with Conservative Members who say that such an authority has not been an issue, because, again and again, when on the doorstep during the election campaign and since, I have found that the lack of a voice for London is a recurrent theme. People feel that London has been the poorer for the past 11 years for being without an authority.

Far greater satisfaction comes in knowing what the mayor and the Greater London authority together will achieve for London, for the story of contemporary London is truly a tale of two cities. The story of both cities must be heard if we are to get the full picture—that is a mixed metaphor, but I am sure that hon. Members will forgive me.

The first London is on a roll: last week, we were voted the best city for business for the eighth year running; London is setting the trends in art and culture; and our property and housing markets are booming—land in central London currently fetches up to £3 million an acre and the housing market is dominated by international investors attracted by the business climate. This London attracts the envy, and sometimes the annoyance, of other parts of Britain. London's success is something we should be proud of and I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) in that respect. We want to attract tourism as well as top-quality business and industry, and central to the mayor's role will be the championing of London.

Yet London's success masks and sometimes aggravates the problems of the second city. The property values I have just mentioned add up to a crisis in affordable housing, especially in central London. Because of London's position as a capital city, our local authorities shoulder a disproportionate share of both the practical and the financial responsibility for the care of asylum seekers. As the London Research Centre's excellent strategy document "The Capital Divided" demonstrated a few months ago, we have pockets of the most acute deprivation to be found anywhere in the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the problem of unemployment in the capital; in my constituency, there are estates and pockets where the rate of unemployment, especially among members of ethnic minorities, far exceeds 50 per cent.

We have a complex needs profile because we have high levels of mobility. We have many single people, which can lead to problems of support. We have great ethnic diversity and, although we should celebrate that diversity, there is no question but that it adds to the pressures on the city by increasing the complexity and costs of service delivery in every field—from health care, to further education, to policing. Without a single voice for London, we cannot tackle those problems effectively.

The solutions to the problems of the second city of London must be Londonwide and arrived at democratically. They must ensure that commercial success and social cohesion go hand in hand. That view is expressed in the prospectus for London published by London Pride, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate referred and which demonstrates that business interests recognise the importance of social cohesion to the creation of economic success.

I pay tribute to the work of the Association of London Government, which represents many London constituencies. It is a measure of the maturity of modern London politics that its wide geographical differences and diversity of politics have so often been synthesised in

a way that allows the ALG to speak convincingly for London. The ALG should not, however, be London's sole voice. It is quite properly concerned with local government, and its representatives from the boroughs must champion, first and foremost, the interests of those boroughs. It is quite right that the representatives of each local authority should vigorously lobby for their own corner, but the new London mayor and the new authority must speak for the whole of London and be free from local concerns. I therefore strongly believe that the new authority should not consist of an elected representative for each borough. The danger is that such representatives would inevitably champion their own corners at London's expense.

When it comes to promoting London commercially, or to regeneration, social cohesion or transport policy, we need a pan-London focus. Representatives must stand above the interests of particular boroughs; hence I agree completely with my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) that it would be wrong to elect people on a borough basis.

I have a request to the Minister: we must not allow a yes vote to be the end of extending local democracy, however excellent the latter may be. Many organisations such as the London Voluntary Service Council and London Youth Matters have come up with imaginative ideas for building on local democracy in London. If there is a democratic deficit in London—and there is—that deficit is even greater among young people and black and ethnic minority communities. Perhaps the GLC's most creditable achievement was that it connected with groups of people who were usually outside the traditional processes of government. Even the GLC's fiercest critics would recognise that, in its last years, through its grant giving and its arts and culture policies, it managed to connect with people's imaginations and to draw in people who would not ordinarily even vote.

The new mayor and the new GLA must bring that achievement up to date for the 21st century. As the London Youth Matters journal says, the mayor and authority

"should establish strong, clear and recognised channels for consulting stakeholders, experts and service users, including the youth sector".

The priorities of the mayor and the GLA will probably mirror the concerns of young people. A great deal of work will be done on the environment, on sustainable development, on promoting the arts and culture and on policing. We shall have an excellent opportunity to engage with young people in the black and ethnic minority communities—people who are usually left outside the traditional political process, albeit at our peril.

The London Voluntary Service Council has published proposals for a civic forum to increase participation by Londoners in their own government. Certainly, there are dangers in creating ever more tiers of organisation, but a great many good ideas are present in the proposal for a civic forum, which I commend to the Minister for more debate after the White Paper comes out. There is, for instance, the idea of holding a regular and open question time for the mayor and of holding meetings in rotation across London. I am not so sure about the proposal to copy the mayor of Barcelona, who stays with families around the city now and then. That might turn into too much of a good thing: first prize in the raffle would be a night with the mayor, second prize would be two nights with the mayor.

Be that as it may, such ideas, although not appropriate for legislation, have a great deal to commend them. They also give the lie to Conservative Members who have poured scorn on the scale of the consultation exercise. Most of the 1,200 responses came from representative organisations that had themselves consulted their members or member groups and which have stimulated an exciting debate, whose fruits we are only just beginning to see in London.

As a central London representative, I am conscious of the fact that many people who will want to vote in the referendum will be excluded because they are not on the electoral register. My constituency, possibly along with that of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), must contain the lowest number of eligible voters on any register in London. It is difficult to ensure that everyone is on the register; it is up to local authorities to make sure that they are.

I hope that the Minister will do everything in his power to urge registration officers during the next couple of months, while lists are being prepared for next spring, and to sign up everyone—particularly single people living in houses in multiple occupation. They are often the hardest to reach, but it is important that they take part in the referendum too. They want to vote in this exciting extension of democracy. They will vote yes in the referendum. That is what the people of London want and deserve.

7.46 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), who is no longer in the Chamber, represents a constituency that I, too, have visited. I wonder whether anyone in the Chamber has not visited it, in fact. He said in his maiden speech today that he was a bearded nonentity. That is certainly not true. Within seconds of his starting his maiden speech, many of his hon. Friends had come into the Chamber to support him. He is lucky to be able to wear a beard; I understand that beards are frowned on in the Labour party these days—although I can spot one on the Labour Back Benches this evening.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) on an excellent maiden speech. Wimbledon is near my constituency; I know the Polka theatre well. Indeed, I could recommend a number of places in Wimbledon which he did not mention, although he may know of them. I particularly enjoy Zorba's, and the best tea house in south-west London, if not the whole of London, is Samuel Johnson's. The hon. Member for Wimbledon had an easier job of describing his constituency and its contents than did the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound).

I welcome the progress made so far by the Government on the Bill. I also welcome the admission by the official Opposition that, years after they abolished London's elected authority, they have finally recognised that London needs strong government. I should also welcome an apology from the Conservatives for what they did.

The first half of the question on the proposed ballot paper concerns the elected mayor. Although it has been mentioned frequently, it is worth mentioning again.

The proposal has the support of the Government and of the official Opposition. However, I do not believe that it has been extensively tried and tested. The Minister

[Mr. Tom Brake]

mentioned Cologne; he might have mentioned Rome, but after mentioning those two cities he might run out of working examples. The truth is that the idea is an American import, like zero tolerance, and may not work terribly well here either.

The concept of an elected mayor is alien to our culture. It may be an exciting democratic innovation, as the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) said, but that is exactly why the proposal deserves a second question on the ballot paper. The mayor may be tyrannical and overrule the elected assembly. Alternatively, the mayor may be weak and there may be no strong government in London.

An issue that has not been addressed in depth is the possibility that the mayor will be of a different political persuasion from the majority of representatives to the assembly. In that case, what will happen to strong government in London? The Labour party appears to recognise that possibility in its general election manifesto, which says that both the

"strategic authority and a mayor . . . will speak up for the needs of the city and plan its future".

That is all very well, but if they are both speaking up and they say different things, what will happen? If one adds the roles and responsibilities of a development agency in London, an even more confused picture is painted. I should welcome feedback on how that anomaly will be tackled.

On the second half of the question, I strongly support the proposal for an elected assembly if it means genuine regional government; that is the key point. It is not true, as a Conservative Member said, that we want to break up the United Kingdom. Regional government is not about breaking up the UK but about giving people throughout the country more say in their business.

As I am sure hon. Members know, Liberal Democrats prefer the single transferable vote system because we believe that it will bring the greatest representation from a wide range of communities to London government. The Minister asked whether we wanted a third question on the ballot paper, to which the answer has been given that we do not. Nevertheless, we are worried about whether the elected authority will have teeth—whether it will have tax-raising or tax-varying powers which will enable it to be something other than a talking shop.

Liberal Democrat Members have serious doubts about mayors. I am afraid that we have serious doubts about the Government's commitment to genuine regional government with the powers to back it up, and we have serious concerns about the appropriateness of debating the Bill without a White Paper before us. For that reason, we shall support our reasoned amendment.

7.52 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I was pleased to hear the maiden speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) and for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale), and by the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), none of whom, sadly, is now in the Chamber. I was going to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon that Wimbledon football club is very happy indeed in Croydon, in Selhurst park; long may that continue. Further to the comments by the hon. Member for Uxbridge about the by-election victory, one lesson that the Labour party learnt from that campaign was not to pick a by-election candidate with the name of Slaughter. I believe that the Minister without Portfolio will muse over that piece of advice.

We face a new future with a new Government, with a new confidence. The problem confronting our capital is that London has no strategic authority, no champion, no voice in the global community to lead it in a way that such a great city deserves. That means that we have no holistic view of our transport, planning, economic and environmental needs, and that position should not be sustained if we want to keep our place in the world pecking order.

After 18 years of Conservative government, the legacy in London is there for all to see: social exclusion, homelessness, poverty, rising crime and an emergent underclass, which are, largely, symptomatic of a Government who had a laissez-faire view on social and economic matters, and a transport system grinding towards an inevitable halt.

In Paris, the catastrophe of car emissions has led to draconian measures and crisis management. We do not want our Government to adopt such measures in London. That is one reason why a strategic authority is crucial in our capital city.

We have heard that the economy is doing well, but the economy has no real direction. The business community, and the economic community more generally, welcome our proposals.

In the general election, the new Government were given an unprecedented mandate for change, and nowhere more so than in London. A primary reason is that Londoners were promised not only the Government's fresh policies, but a Greater London authority and a mayor to champion London in the global community. We already have a mandate for change, therefore, and in many respects people may be asking, "If you have this tremendous mandate for change, for a mayor and for a Greater London authority, why bother having a referendum at all?" That is a very good question. The answer is that democracy is at the heart of the new Government, at the heart of the Labour party.

Mr. Pickles: But if one does not give the electorate of London a choice, is not that phoney democracy?

Mr. Davies: It is a bit rich to hear comments about democracy from the beleaguered ranks of the rump of the former Conservatives in London: a political anachronism, a handful of people who cannot make up their minds among themselves, talking about democracy 10 years after the only choice that Londoners were given was no choice—abolition. It is ridiculous.

Mr. Pickles: And the answer is?

Mr. Davies: The answer is that we advanced the proposition of a mayor and a Greater London authority to the people of London—that is in our manifesto and that is our mandate—and we said that we would conduct a referendum, and we will.

Mr. Lansley: Will the hon. Gentleman continue on this subject for a moment? A referendum that takes place

before Parliament has legislated for an assembly and a mayor in London is essentially advisory to the Government and cannot be binding on Parliament—that is in the nature of our constitution. Would it not be more democratic, in the terms that the hon. Gentleman proposes, to hold the referendum after debate and the passage of legislation through the House, so that the Government's set of proposals, if approved by the House, is then presented for the democratic mandate of the public to which the hon. Gentleman refers? Why hold the referendum now?

Mr. Davies: The hon. Gentleman knows that 61 questions are out for consultation. We are an open Government who listen to people's views, but we are not prepared to pick to pieces the strategic element of our proposal, which we are duty bound to put to the people of London, in the absurd way that is suggested. The academic points that are being suggested by the handful of rabble on the Conservative Benches are ridiculous.

The abolition of the Greater London council was not only the abolition of an administrative structure without consulting the people, but a negation of democracy—a slap in the face for the people of London. The people of London have retaliated and said that they want change and new government, and that is what we are delivering. We are returning to them to advise them of what we are considering, and we are keeping some of our options open, because we are sensitive to the people who elected us—unlike the previous Administration.

Our great city comprises 33 boroughs, each with a unique identity. I had the great privilege and pleasure of leading the council of Croydon, the biggest of the boroughs, and being part of the leaders' committee of the Association of London Government, which has been referred to with such blessing by Conservative Members. The Conservatives propose that the leaders' committee be the assembly that governs London as the tier beneath the mayor. That is a silly suggestion. The leaders have enough to do in running their authorities. It is clear from the leaders' views, as reflected in the views of the Association of London Government, that they value strategic direction and want more rather than less power, which would be exerted holistically for the good of the capital, rather than the fragmented mish-mash supported by the Opposition, whose numbers seem to be falling every moment.

It is not just local authorities and the people of London who want a strategic authority; so does the business community. The Confederation of British Industry in London looks forward with glee to the idea of a Greater London authority, a mayor and a London development agency.

Mr. Lansley: It is good of the hon. Gentleman to give way twice. I am a former member of the leaders' committee of the Association of London Government, and I am not clear whether the hon. Gentleman is saying that the members of that committee felt incapable of acting as scrutineers for a mayor giving strategic direction. It would be for the mayor rather than the assembly to give strategic direction, and for the assembly, as executive body, to act as scrutineer. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the borough leaders—he was once such a leader—are incapable of acting as scrutineers of the strategic direction coming from the mayor?

Mr. Davies: I have a number of points to make in response to that intervention. First, borough leaders are not elected to do that; they have their own constituencies to look after. The key point is that the Government take the strategic development of our great capital seriously and would want members of the authority to work full time with the mayor, not just as a counterbalance, but to define London's destiny. It is not enough to have a group of people who spend their time doing other things as well.

When I was leader of Croydon council—London's biggest council—I was also running a business. The suggestion that someone can lead an authority and also take on the governance of London is symptomatic of the fact that the Opposition do not take the governance of London seriously.

Mr. Pickles: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's courtesy to the House. Does he propose that each and every member of the strategic authority should be full time?

Mr. Davies: That question remains open. My personal view is that members should be given an opportunity to devote more time to their duties than the leader of an average council does. As with many such matters, we are in a process of consultation and I have expressed my personal view.

As I was saying, a number of us from the London group spent an enjoyable evening with leading members of the CBI in London, who were at great pains to express their joy at the prospect of a Greater London authority, a mayor and a London development agency. They want the strategic development of a transport infrastructure, so that businesses and economic development do not grind to a halt, as they inevitably will unless we intervene. They look forward to a new deal for business, focusing on manufacturing development, and to the opportunities of new markets and new technologies. They want to combine a partnership approach to the new economy in a new world with the idea of combating social exclusion through economic development. Any visionary business community realises that it is not simply a matter of individual segments of the economy working randomly while the social community disintegrates. London's wider community needs to be planned, so that London can be a place to live and work. That is a key to the underlying transport problem. People live in one place and work in another, and there is no overview of the capital's long-term sustainable environmental development.

Environmental sustainability is another great key for the Government. We seek to achieve a 20 per cent. reduction in emissions by 2010 and, given the amount of carbon dioxide generated by London—more per person than elsewhere—it is the principal player in the country. Unless we take a wider view of that problem, individual boroughs will have different policies, and we shall be unable to proceed coherently.

The City of London is happy about the change in Government as we have introduced a more rational interest rate policy and are taking a new direction towards economic and monetary union. The City now has a chance to hold on to its eminence in world markets rather than seeing all its jobs go to Frankfurt as a result of the Euro-scepticism expressed by certain members of the rather small Conservative party.

Opposition to the proposal is symptomatic of what we have seen since May: Canute conservatism—resisting inevitable change rather than embracing positive progress.

[Mr. Davies]

It is very sad to see. The Opposition cannot see the wood for the trees. They regard London as the sum of its ingredient parts rather than as a large body that needs to be managed holistically. They see the future as the activity of an invisible hand, which will bring about spontaneously some great social and economic result that will inevitably be in London's best interests. Demonstrably, that is false and facile, and the people of London know it.

It comes as no surprise to learn that 82 per cent. of Londoners who were recently polled support the idea of an assembly with a mayor as a composite proposition. The positive consultation on which we have embarked echoes that proposition, which is why we are proceeding in this way.

The Conservatives have changed their view on the London issue. First, they were against all our proposals; then they wanted some sort of mayor; now they say that they want an assembly but that it should consist of ALG leaders. They are gradually moving forward, which is a slight improvement on their normal position: that the best policy is to do nothing, assuming that nothing will change in the rest of the world. Change occurs constantly and we need positive proposals rather than Canute conservatism.

The proposition of a mayor without the accountability provided by a wider authority cannot be seriously entertained, because there would be neither balance of power nor a democratic mandate. The system proposed by the Opposition would lead to fraud and corruption, as has happened in parts of the United States. Opposition Members ask why the referendum will not contain more questions, which is ironic, given that originally they wanted no questions at all. They did not want a referendum because they did not want change. No one asked about the abolition of the GLC.

Opposition Members also said that you cannot vote for a principle unless we have every detail before voting, because that would be a recipe for confusion and inaction. They then said that the police authority cannot be changed on the ground that it has not been changed since 1829. That is extremely convincing—probably your best argument.

Mr. McDonnell: Does my hon. Friend recall that, when the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was Home Secretary, he proposed that there should be a police authority for London, but he was rapidly replaced by—I cannot remember his constituency—Michael Howard?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) has twice used the word "your", which is not the correct language for this House. The hon. Gentleman who has just intervened, the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), must remember the names of constituencies. We do not use names of that kind in this House.

Mr. Davies: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance on the use of the word "your".

As regards the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), I did not recall that. It is an illuminating story about the way in which the former Government used to behave, and is another reason why only three Conservative Members are present. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, a gang of three.

I take seriously the points made by the Opposition, and am dealing with them one by one. As there are only a few more arguments to deal with, I shall not take longer than three hours.

It was suggested that there would be inevitable conflict between the local authorities and the Greater London authority. The Government have a holistic vision for London and support the principle of subsidiarity. The ideas of democracy and decentralisation are dear to the hearts of the Government. That is why we want regional development agencies and devolution. It would be wrong to argue otherwise. There will be no conflict; there will be a happy partnership for progressive change.

One of the arguments advanced by Liberal Democrat Members was that there should be two questions in the referendum. I understand the arguments for two questions, but we are presenting a package to the people of London.

We heard arguments about health and education. One of my hon. Friends suggested that strategic scrutiny and advocacy were to be welcomed. The overall package for the Greater London authority already embraces the economy, transport, the environment, planning, police and fire services, and is a great step forward in the strategic management of London. Clearly, we are committed to a streamlined, efficient and strategically geared authority.

We see a great future for our great city in a new world. I am proud to support the Bill, and look forward to the referendum with glee.

8.11 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): It has been a pleasure to listen to the debate, not least because it gave me the opportunity to listen to the maiden speeches of the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound)—who entertained the House extraordinarily well and gave us all the hope that, although we have had to wait several months to hear his maiden speech, we will not have to wait long before hearing further speeches from him—and of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). I know that he will be a worthy representative of the constituents of Uxbridge, as was his predecessor, who was much respected in the House.

I regret that I was unable to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale). I shall make a point of listening to him on future occasions, as will other hon. Members.

I do not represent a London constituency, but I wish to speak in the debate because the Bill raises two important issues that have implications that go beyond London. First, hon. Members have referred to the Bill as the precursor to the implementation of regional government in London, as part of a pattern of regional government around England. Many Conservative and other Opposition Members will see that as an unhappy precedent for other parts of England, and, therefore, as one which should be examined with great care during its passage through Parliament and in the discussion of the proposals that will flow from it.

The second and related aspect is the implications of the Bill for local government. I declare an interest in that respect: I am the vice-president of the Local Government

Association. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) rightly made an important distinction by way of a rebuke to the Minister for London and Construction who was wont to speak of the implementation of regional government as local government. It is not local government; it is regional government.

There are those who support regional government for itself. Some of us see in regional government the tendency—I suspect that it is an inevitable tendency—to exercise the powers presently held by central Government. That will probably be the lesser part of the activity of regional government over time. The greater part of its activity will be to draw powers up from subsidiary bodies in local government, and to reduce the strength of local government.

For my own purposes, which I hope to commend to the House, I have examined the Bill and the proposals that it contains or to which it will lead in respect of three tests. First, will it strengthen local government? Secondly, will it result in better government? Thirdly, will it improve the effectiveness and value for money of government?

There are two proposals: the proposal for an elected mayor, and the proposal for an assembly. Let us apply the three tests to the proposal for an elected mayor. Will it strengthen local government? I freely confess that I was in a minority among Conservative candidates before the election, in that I publicly supported the principle of an elected mayor and wrote on that subject before the election. I welcome the fact that my Front-Bench colleagues supported the concept of an elected mayor after the election.

It never seemed to me likely or desirable that an elected mayor would come first in London, and then elsewhere. It always seemed more likely that an elected mayor would come in other parts of the country, in more manageable circumstances, in a unitary authority rather than in London, with its many and complex problems, where, unfortunately, the concept of an elected mayor may be tested to destruction. I support the concept for reasons that I shall explain later, but I am worried that using London as a testbed may prove to be an unfortunate choice.

There is a tension in relation to an elected mayor and the strength of local government. Back in 1991, an elected mayor was one of the options that the Conservative Administration tested, and it met with no support in local government. Yet there are clear needs in local government that an elected mayor would meet.

There is a regrettable lack of public participation in local government elections; there is a lack of public awareness of the importance of the decisions and spending undertaken by local government; there is a lack of political impact within their communities on the part of many elected councillors. In a modern media environment, in which we must all live, happily or unhappily, the need for leadership and personalities with impact is part of the process of securing public acceptance of the Government, their purposes and direction. We must recognise that an elected mayor can play a role in providing such impetus, direction and impact of personality.

There are concerns in local government that elected mayors, and the proposal for London in particular, will tend to draw powers away from more locally elected representatives. That may be so. A mayor on a Londonwide basis will tend to diminish the authority of the London boroughs. That is unlike the potential impact of directly elected mayors in other smaller unitary authorities around the country, who might reinforce the strength of local government.

If the proposal will not strengthen local government in London, will the direct election of a mayor lead to better government in London? On that question, we can reach a more positive view. I will not elaborate, as that has been widely agreed across the House during the debate, except by Liberal Democrat Members. A directly elected mayor would give leadership, offer strategic vision, provide energy and impetus and draw national policies towards a more London-oriented view. London is different from other regions in that there is a complex interplay, especially on transport and other policies, between the priorities for London and for the nation as a whole.

On the third criterion of effectiveness and value for money, the election of a mayor is a low-cost and high-impact option compared with other means of providing a voice for London and strategic direction. It is possible, and I hope that it will be the case, that the mayor of London will be supported by a small executive body working with and through existing bodies, rather than through a bureaucracy of his or her own making. According to the test that I postulate, an elected mayor gets two yeses and one question mark.

What about a separately elected assembly? I have no doubt that such an assembly would weaken the powers of London boroughs. I believe that it would take powers from them and, therefore, by extension, make government more distant from those whom it is meant to serve. It is the nature of the beast that members of such a body who have no alternative responsibilities, other loyalties or pressures on their time—some hon. Members have said that that is not desirable—will seek to aggrandise their powers in the separately elected authority by creating more work, which is presently undertaken by the London boroughs.

Mr. Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why he believes that if the London assembly were given the powers of the Government office for London or of quangos, it would inevitably—as he has stressed on several occasions—take powers away from local government?

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that very important point. We should begin by examining the powers that will be given formally to a separately elected assembly. At the outset, they may appear to be the powers of central Government rather than those of local government or the London boroughs, but I believe that the assembly will be constrained in several ways. Central Government will find it extremely inconvenient if a separately elected assembly seeks to second guess, depart from or contradict central Government policies. Therefore, over time, central Government will pressure that body to spend less time second guessing central Government policies and more time seeking to implement its strategic direction through the powers of other subsidiary bodies. I fear that such an assembly will ultimately seek and receive the power from central Government to issue directions to bodies within London.

[Mr. Lansley]

I suspect that the first and most serious of those areas of activity will involve the relationship between the regional development agency and the planning system in London. I shall not elaborate on that point now, but I believe that that will be affected. A separately elected assembly will add a further tier of government—it will reflect the regional ambitions of Ministers through which they seek to justify their devolution plans elsewhere. In seeking to expand their role, assembly members will second guess the mayor. The danger is that that will create the grotesque over-government of London.

That brings us to the question of what we should have instead of a separately elected assembly. I must depart from the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and the Minister. It seems extraordinary to assert that the leaders of the London boroughs are incapable of coming together and doing other than arguing solely for their local interests. It is extraordinary to claim that they are incapable of acting as the scrutineers of strategic activity and direction given by an executive mayor. I believe that we should look to the London boroughs or their representatives—the leaders or other people within those boroughs—to provide the essential checks and balances on the activities of the directly elected mayor. That should occur not simply for reasons of propriety or so that committee appointments are made in accordance with Nolan rules, but in order to meet the needs of many parts of London.

I make no claim to represent any part of London, but I was born in that area that was kindly called "Essex London" earlier in the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge discovered during the by-election campaign, those who live in boroughs such as Hillingdon and Havering—whence I came—do not necessarily consider themselves part of an homogenous London.

Hon. Members have referred time and again to the communities of London, the diversity of London, the differing interests of London and the culture and geography of London. It is vital that the representatives of that diversity should be at the core of scrutinising the activities of the directly elected mayor.

Mr. Wilkinson: My hon. Friend has generously allowed me to have a second bite of the cherry. He and I are at one in recognising the fact that particular borough interests should be represented on the assembly so that the views of constituents in those areas are put across and so that the mayor pursues policies that suit those interests. However, would it not be better if the representatives were elected directly by the borough electorates so that the voters may choose the people who are best able to represent them on a Londonwide forum? Even if the representatives fulfil that function indirectly, we must remember that they were elected originally to represent a particular ward at borough level, which is a different level of responsibility and may require different qualities.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, which allows me to understand his case better. I agree that representatives on an assembly that scrutinises the activities of a directly elected mayor should be drawn from the London boroughs, for precisely the reasons that my hon. Friend has given. However, I believe that there is positive merit in representatives having direct responsibility for implementing policies within boroughs and having other pressures on their time. As I explained earlier, I am afraid that the assembly may draw unto itself more activities simply to justify its existence.

I shall move towards a conclusion, as I do not want to delay others who wish to contribute to the debate. The assembly does not pass any of the three tests that I have suggested, including cost effectiveness. According to the Government's estimates, it will cost £20 million simply to establish the body, let alone meet its future expenditure requirements. Therefore, as we must draw differing conclusions about the two proposals that lie at the heart of the legislation, I believe that the people of London should be able to reach different views about the merits of a separately elected assembly compared with a directly elected mayor. It seems wholly wrong to encapsulate the two issues in one question: if people have differing views, they should be able to express them. I think that the Government should be abashed at their transparent fear that the people will opt for a mayor and against an assembly.

I must refer to another serious flaw in the legislation, which—at the risk of repeating myself—I raised by way of intervention during the speech of the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies). As with the devolution legislation for Scotland, on which I made my maiden speech, the Bill seeks to treat a referendum that will be held before legislation is passed in this place as if it took place after the passage of legislation. There is a long constitutional tradition in this country that the role of referendums is to approve constitutional changes after the two Houses of Parliament have decided on the measures. When referendums were held in the past—I think particularly of the 1975 referendum—it was made clear that if the relevant legislation had not been passed, the results were advisory and not binding on Parliament. Yet Labour Members referred to the referendum today as though it was mandatory—as though a mandate would be exercised on Parliament. I repeat the point that I made on 21 May in the House: it is a constitutional aberration to treat a referendum in that way. If the Government wish to be advised of the views of the people of London on their policy, I have no problem with their holding a referendum, but I object to their treating that referendum as binding on Parliament.

London is a unique city. References to forms of government in other countries are probably misplaced, because London is unique in many ways. People have often sought to translate the circumstances of other cities to those of London and have found that it is not possible, because London is much bigger or because it has more complex problems. London is a city of many communities. The borough councils are close to those communities. If a mayor is needed to give London impetus and direction, he should be given the support and the scrutiny of the London boroughs in an assembly derived from the councillors of those boroughs rather than in a separately elected body, distanced from the London boroughs.

The deficiencies of the Bill are clear. I urge hon. Members to support the Conservatives' reasoned amendment.

8.30 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): We have heard three excellent maiden speeches this evening. The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) said that he was particularly interested in wildlife and conservation. I look forward to hearing him speak on that subject. He will welcome the fact that, as the consultation document points out, one of the key roles of the new authority will be ensuring sustainability for London in the 21st century. I welcome him as a fellow business man. I am pleased to see him swell the ranks on both sides of hon. Members with such backgrounds.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) also made an excellent maiden speech. It was extremely humorous and greatly enjoyed on both sides. He certainly placed his constituency on the map in a way that no other Member has managed.

The third maiden speech was from my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale). I am a constituent of his. It gave me great pleasure to see the results in Mitcham and Morden and in Wimbledon. I thank him for his kind words about my previous role as leader of Merton council.

I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), who is not now in the Chamber, that Sam Hammam of Wimbledon football club tells me that he has great interest in returning to the borough. Many hon. Members will know that my first allegiance is to Norwich City football club, but, for most of the past six years, I have been dealing with how to bring Wimbledon football club back to the borough. I am glad that my hon. Friend is taking on that additional role. I look forward to seeing them play back in the borough shortly.

Although I am a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon, I live only 600 yd from my Putney constituency. I mention that because those Conservative Members who are previous leaders of Wandsworth council seem to have done the chicken run to leave Wandsworth as quickly as possible. The hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) has moved a significant distance. The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) previously represented Croydon, Central, but I think that he felt that the heat was getting a bit much, so he moved even further away.

The current leader of Wandsworth council tried to move to Beckenham recently, applying to be the Conservative candidate. Wandsworth is no longer flavour of the month, or even the decade, as it was under previous Administrations. Mr. Lister did not make the final list and is not the candidate. Obviously he was seeking to leave Wandsworth before defeat in next May's election.

Mr. Lister has put forward 11 questions that he believes should be included in the referendum. The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) suggested that the Greater London authority and the concept of a directly elected mayor were part of Parkinson's law. Parkinson's law has already struck in Wandsworth, with the 11 questions. Mr. Lister says:

"It may be a trail-blazing referendum to include so many separate questions."

I suggest that it would be a trail blazed too far.

Hon. Members may like to know what the 11 proposals to be put to a referendum are. The first is that there should be a directly elected mayor. The second is that there should be a directly elected Greater London assembly. The third is that there should be an assembly of the 32 borough leaders. The fourth is that tax-raising power should be given to the mayor and the GLA. The fifth is that the budget should be set by the London boroughs. The sixth is that there should be proportional representation on a Londonwide list. The seventh is that there should be local candidates voted in locally.

We have got to only number seven. There are still four to come. I was wondering why the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) intervened in the debate, but he may be interested in the remaining questions, because they relate to options on the boundaries of the Greater London authority. The first option is to adopt the old Greater London council boundary. The second is to use the Metropolitan police boundary. The third suggestion is to use the M25 as a boundary. The fourth, which takes us to number 11 in the list of questions, is to use the boundary of Serplan—the south-east regional planning committee. I wondered whether that was an attempt to extend the boundary so far that there might be a chance of somebody voting Conservative. So many people in London vote Labour that the boundary would have to stretch as far as South Cambridgeshire for anyone to vote Conservative.

Mr. McNulty: They would even lose that.

Mr. Colman: Indeed.

The great explosion of interest in referendums has not applied to the workings of local councils. Wandsworth has undertaken many interesting policies, but the people of Wandsworth or Putney have not been polled, other than on a four-yearly basis, on their views on the cuts.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was concerned that the Bill should not result in an unsigned cheque being given. The White Paper will be available next March, giving the people of London full information on which to base their views.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) was concerned about a perceived attitude among Labour Members that we are the masters now. We are talking about a manifesto pledge that was subject to considerable debate and many statements during the general election campaign. We put our proposals for a Greater London authority made up of a directly elected mayor and a directly elected assembly to the people of London during the election campaign.

I am in favour of the combination of mayor and assembly. I have spoken elsewhere about Seattle in the state of Washington in the United States of America. It has done excellent work on sustainability, in which it leads the world. Seattle and King county together contain 7 million people, which is equivalent to the size of London. There we have an excellent directly elected mayor, Norm Rice, who has been mayor for over a decade. Jim Street was the leader of the assembly between 1979 and 1993—some 14 years. The leader is elected by members of the assembly in the same way as council leaders are elected in the London boroughs. I commend that system as a concept. It is important to have a balance between a leader elected by the membership of the assembly and the directly elected mayor. Such a system of checks and balances works; I have seen it working in

[Mr. Colman]

Seattle, one of the most prosperous and fastest-expanding but civilised cities on this earth. I very much commend the system to the House as a way forward.

I was particularly impressed by the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) who seemed to break ranks with the Opposition in terms of coming out in favour of a directly elected assembly and a directly elected mayor. He believed that that was the only way in which to make things happen, but he was concerned that the directly elected mayor would be there only for photo opportunities.

I was proud to be on the streets of London on Saturday with my four-year-old son Oliver, whose birthday it was. I have often attended the Lord Mayor's show and this year, it was again a marvellous spectacle for all Londoners. It may be a photo opportunity, but it is great to see the ceremonial attached to that ancient office. I look forward to the first Lord Mayor's show of the whole of London in 2000 and I look forward to taking my children to it. I assume that it will be in April or May 2000. We shall have a show that is not just a photo opportunity, but a celebration by the people of London of their future and what they have voted for. They will be able to see what they lost in 1986 and have now got back.

I talked about the London borough of Wandsworth and the document it produced. I am interested by the positions that Wandsworth takes, which often seem to be contradictory. Two major issues face my constituents, both of which are related to the Greater London authority. The first is air traffic noise and the second is the national health service. My hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London was kind enough to reply to me in an Adjournment debate on aircraft noise last Monday and she gave me some assurances. In that debate, I pointed out the terrible suffering of the people of Putney and the need for responsibility for aircraft noise to come under the directly elected mayor and assembly rather than under national Government. That is very much wanted by the people of my area.

Interestingly, the leader of Wandsworth council states clearly:

"However, the existing framework copes well in the limited areas where co-ordination is needed. Many issues (e.g. noise and air quality) are not peculiar to London, and it is sufficient for national arrangements and powers to apply."

On noise, the leader of the council says:

"it is difficult to identify what added value could conceivably be supplied by a GLA. The powers are mainly national ones applied locally by the boroughs. Any London co-ordination is already handled by the ALG".

I very much support the Association of London Government, but I do not think that it is involved with aircraft noise. The leader of the council continues:

"The main London-wide issue, aircraft noise, is handled through the land-use planning framework, as currently exemplified by the public enquiry on the proposed Terminal 5 at Heathrow."

That is not acceptable to the people of Putney and Wandsworth. They want to see those matters decided regionally and not nationally. I strongly disagree with the leader of Wandsworth council and my view has significant support in my constituency.

At the moment, national health service planning in London is rather like Serplan as it goes up to Cambridgeshire at one end and to the English channel at the other, with the North Thames and South Thames regional health authorities. There is no London health executive. I feel that most keenly in terms of fighting for the future of Queen Mary's university hospital. My predecessor, David Mellor, claims that I am doing nothing of the sort. I assert strongly to the House that I am fighting with every bone in my body to ensure that the hospital stays open and has a full range of services.

The leader of Wandsworth council, having backed the need for the hospital to remain open and to have full services, nevertheless feels that health should not be dealt with at Greater London authority level. He says:

"However, I do not believe health is a desirable function for any GLA, either at the strategic or operational level."

That is a disgrace. What is needed is for the Greater London authority to take an interest in health. We should move away from the extraordinary situation whereby health policy is made over a huge area stretching from Cambridgeshire to the English channel.

I very much look forward to the White Paper in spring 1998 which will give us a blueprint for the Greater London authority. There are two areas about which I am particularly concerned. I am pleased that we now have a business board for London. It has been a pity that the voice of the business community has been muted or indistinct. The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Confederation of British Industry London region and London First are coming together in a business board. It is very much the way forward to have a single voice that can put views to the new strategic London authority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) talked about the London Voluntary Service Council's proposals for a civic forum. Something similar has already been agreed to go alongside the Scottish Parliament and I hope that we can have such a forum in London. I am proud of what I have been able to do over the past two and a half years in putting together the London Agenda 21 Forum. It works on the basis of a stakeholder forum and it ensures that all voices are listened to in London—that black and ethnic minorities, young people, the voluntary sector, women and all the various communities of London have a say in the future of London. Such a forum will be important in advising the Greater London authority, both in terms of the directly elected assembly and the directly elected mayor.

It is right to go for only one question in the referendum. That is made clear in our manifesto, the basis on which we fought the general election. I look forward to the Wandsworth 11 questions being brought down to only one question in Wandsworth and to two questions in London. Who will rule Wandsworth for the next four years? I look forward to there being a Labour council there. I also look forward to our having an elected strategic authority in the form of a directly elected assembly and a directly elected mayor.

8.48 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): We have been fortunate today to hear a number of distinguished maiden speeches. I heard the speech by the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound). It was an amusing contribution and he spoke with great clarity. I am very

much looking forward to the next time that we have an opportunity to hear him because we can then intervene and have a really good go at him.

Unfortunately, I was unable to hear the two other maiden speeches because of a constituency commitment, but I look forward to reading them in tomorrow's *Hansard*.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), who made a number of proposals with regard to the mayor. In particular, he suggested Seattle as a likely model. After all, Seattle is the suicide capital of the United States and I can think of no better model for the referendum than a city where many people earnestly wish to cast off this mortal coil.

Having heard the hon. Member for Putney speak a number of times, it is clear that he really must rid himself of his obsession with Eddie Lister, the leader of Wandsworth council. Over the years, the hon. Gentleman has taken a significant number of biffings from Eddie Lister, and no doubt he will face more over the next few years. However, we should like to hear his views on other matters than his dislike of Eddie Lister. It has to be said that Mr. Lister's suggestions, which offer the electorate considerable choice, result from the fact that the Government are providing no choice at all.

A number of Labour Members have chided the Conservatives for changing their views about the election of a London mayor. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) and I made a significant contribution to that and I make no apology for that. We listened to our local councils, London boroughs and, above all, we listened to the people of London to find out what they wanted. The Government may elaborately dig an elephant trap for the Conservative party, but we have no obligation to fall into it and repeatedly impale ourselves on the sharp sticks waiting there. *[Interruption.]* The Minister makes a sedentary intervention, but I explained the position to him in a television studio not so long ago. *[Interruption.]* The Minister and I move in exalted circles.

It is important that a referendum should ask two questions because the first real mayor in the United Kingdom with substantial powers, other than ceremonial powers, will be in London. It is an important innovation, so we should be able to give the people of London a choice. After all, most people understand what a strategic authority is about and have no problems in coming to terms with it. We should be able to ask the people of London, "Do you want this innovation or would you prefer a traditional model? Would you prefer to have the traditional model alongside this innovation?"

Let me take my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire to task in a small way for saying that referendums are not mandatory on Parliament. That may be the constitutional position, but the hard truth is that votes get results, and results give a mandate. Hon. Members who are elected to Parliament would be extremely foolish to ignore what the people of London say.

If referendums are to have a regular place within our constitution and we are to work in the same way as a Swiss canton, we should embrace the concept of referendums. However, there is no point in having a referendum simply to rubber stamp the Government's actions and asking questions such as, "Do you want a General Pinochet elected for another seven years?" or "Do you want a London mayor?" or "Do you want an elected assembly for London?" There has to be a real choice. As has been pointed out by hon. Members on both sides of the House, it is perfectly possible to vote yes in the referendum for a London mayor and a London assembly or for a London mayor or simply for a strategic authority. The Liberal Democrats have made it absolutely clear that they will support a yes campaign in the referendum, even if they have to vote for a London mayor.

A mayor has enormous potential within local and regional government. Clearly, the London mayor will not be the last mayor within the constitutional framework. However, there is a difference. I would have anticipated—and so would my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire—that the first mayor would represent one of our larger city conurbations such as Manchester, Birmingham or Leeds, where the mayor would have significant powers. The mayor for London will have significant powers of persuasion and considerable authority, but he will not have the same powers as the mayor of a metropolitan borough. He will have the opportunity to speak up for the needs of London and to co-ordinate strategic services across the city. However, the real function of a mayor should be to speak for, co-ordinate and control the two sectors of government in London that have real power—central Government and the London boroughs.

Since the abolition of the Greater London council, the London boroughs have carried enormous clout in terms of the delivery of services. We have to recognise that there is a function for local government in London.

I represent an Essex constituency on the fringe of London, but part of my constituency is served by the Metropolitan police. My electorate will have no voice in respect of the policing of the part of my constituency that is served by the Met. Previously, if I was unhappy with the Essex police, I could consult the chief constable, and if I was not happy with the chief constable, I could talk to the police authority. In respect of the part of my constituency served by the Met, I could speak to the Commissioner, and if I was not satisfied I could consult the Home Secretary. However, my constituents who live in the area served by the Met will feel disfranchised and so will I.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) pointed out most persuasively, one needs only to look at a map of the United Kingdom—the airlines and the road network—to recognise that our transport system is centred around London. I should say to the hon. Member for Putney that I do not support the idea that the London authority should be responsible for monitoring aircraft noise, in that the majority of flights in the stacking procedure for Heathrow airport fly over my constituency. I would be very resentful if a London authority were to determine aircraft noise, because much of the aircraft noise is suffered by my constituents in Essex, and not the constituents of the hon. Member for Putney.

We have to recognise that there is a touch of nostalgia or a naivety in speeches from Labour Members. In one breath they charge us with the disappearance of the Greater London council and present the Greater London authority as some kind of retaliation. Unless I have misread the consultation document, there does not seem to be any intention to bring back the Greater London

[Mr. Eric Pickles]

council. Therefore, in many ways, Labour Members are endorsing the decision to abolish it. If they thought that the GLC did such a great job, they would bring it back. Clearly, they do not.

An excellent paper by Tony Travers describes a time in the 19th century when people wrote that London did not exist. As in the 19th century, we have a number of diverse communities across London. There are 33 distinct communities. Labour Members talked about a tale of two cities. The truth is that, in the Greater London area, we have a tale of 33 communities. That is why London boroughs' leaders should play such an important part in consultation and decision on how London should be governed.

It is wrong to suggest that members of a Greater London authority should not be elected on a borough basis. People should be responsive and accountable to their communities. If they are not, they end up on a list, being the property of the political parties. No longer would people stand up for the individual communities that make up London. We would have people who curry favour to ensure that they feature higher and higher on their party's list.

Communities have a right to ensure that London is looked at as a whole. It is very insulting to borough leaders and the people of London to think that one part of London will not pay attention to the others. If a list system exists, the nightmare that Labour Members described will come about. There will be enormous concentration on Westminster, the City and the west end to the detriment of people in outer boroughs.

The primary function of a Greater London authority is to be a check on the mayor. I, however, believe that it will start to grow in one specific area: in its powers to scrutinise, call witnesses and hold inquiries. It is from those inquiries that it will gradually receive its mandate. Increasingly, it will find itself the main executor of Government diktats.

I return to the central question whether we should have two questions on the referendum; whether the referendum is to be used as a rubber stamp. In his very thoughtful introduction to the debate, the Minister for London and Construction promised us many things. He promised us that we would get an explanation of why it was not possible to have a mayor without a strategic authority. Other than saying boldly that that would not work, nothing came out. It is clear to me that he might have a system that is better than what the Liberal Democrats or the Conservatives offer, but he does not have—even so early in what undoubtedly will be a distinguished ministerial career—an absolute monopoly on truth.

The point of political debate is that the public should have an opportunity to make a choice. It could be that the Minister is right. It could be that the Opposition are right. None the less, the people have a right to choose. Otherwise, we are left with the rather sad thought that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) suggested, the referendum is really about trying to get a turnout for an election in which the Government suspect they might not be as popular as they currently are. If we are to have a proper debate, it should have a conclusion. Members of the public have a right to choose.

We have listened to Labour Members talking about 82 per cent. of people being in favour of a mayor and a strategic authority. They have seen opinion polls, done their own private polling and listened to focus groups. If they are so sure, why do not they put the matter to the ultimate test? If they believe that their arguments are so solid, why do they not seek an endorsement from the population of London? A party that pays so much attention to opinion polls and focus groups must also pay attention to a referendum. No political party has anything to lose by giving the people a decent choice in a referendum. The only people who will ultimately lose are the mayor and the members of the strategic authority who will not have any legitimacy because the referendum was confused.

9.5 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): I am grateful to be called to speak in a debate that will give the people of London a say in the future government of their city. I wish first to pay tribute to several hon. Members who have made maiden speeches this evening. The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) made an amusing speech about his constituency. I share with other hon. Members a knowledge of his constituency gained from recent visits, but I am probably the only hon. Member who can say that he has frequently visited and knows intimately almost every constituency in London, as I did in a previous life. I can recommend greasy spoons across the capital and perhaps in a later life I will write an Egon Ronay guide to those august establishments.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) who gave a rallying cry for his constituency and made an eloquent speech on behalf of the people whom he represents. What can I say about my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound)? I feel some sympathy for hon. Members with constituencies adjacent to Ealing, North because they must have great difficulty avoiding the rush of people attempting to leave it. I know that my hon. Friend has a fondness for his constituency that allows him to use the acute sense of humour that he displayed this evening.

As someone who was involved in local government in London for more than a decade, I feel both relief and pride that tonight we will give a democratic voice back to London. When we discuss a Londonwide authority, the discussion inevitably leads to comments about the Greater London council. The criticisms of the GLC have been blown out of proportion and I do not share them. They were mainly cited by those who supported the abolition of the GLC against the best interests of the people of London. However, it cannot be denied that Londoners are more angry today about the lack of an elected Londonwide authority than they ever were with the GLC, for all its faults. All large corporations are open to criticism, and the GLC—and any local authority in London or elsewhere for that matter—is no exception. None of the criticisms of the GLC justified its abolition.

Londoners understand the problems of living in London and the need for a democratic voice across London. That is why we are today debating the reintroduction of a strategic authority. Londoners understand the problems and have a good idea how to solve them.

I can speak with some authority about the problems of the transport system, having worked for more than a decade in the London transport sector. Much has been

made of the need for an integrated transport system in London. Indeed, there are many theories about the definition of an integrated transport policy. To me, it means the transport of people from their point of embarkation to their point of destination, using a variety of transport systems and with the transition from one system to another as seamless as possible. We therefore need to take a strategic approach to London's transport, and we need a Londonwide authority to do that on behalf of the people of London.

Mr. Hill: Drawing on his extensive experience of the transport system, does my hon. Friend agree that it is a massive indictment—it makes the case for a London authority—that in excess of 50,000 minicabs are plying their trade in this city without any form of regulation? That is precisely the role in which an authority for London could be engaged in dealing with the problems of our transport system.

Mr. Efford: I agree with my hon. Friend, who gives me an opportunity to pass on my wisdom on this issue. The suggestion that we need 33 licensing authorities across London is patently barmy. We need legislation to tackle the problems in the private hire industry across London. I have strong views on the issue, which I hope to be able to voice in the House in future.

The traffic congestion across London is another example of the lack of a strategic authority and approach. The piecemeal approach of local traffic management schemes across London is not working. One authority may have an obsession with speed humps—I am thinking of my own local authority. Another uses pinch points and closes roads left, right and centre—I am thinking of Islington here. There is no strategic approach or uniformity in dealing with traffic congestion and no serious attempt is being made to tackle the growth in the use of cars to travel from the suburbs into the centre of London. That issue can be addressed only by a strategic, Londonwide approach.

The majority of people who travel from my constituency for employment travel to central London or around the south circular road, which condemns them to hours and hours of traffic congestion. The transport system is subject to constant breakdowns, delays and cancellations, and buses cannot be relied on because of traffic congestion.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Is it not astonishing that the amount of time wasted daily by traffic congestion on the M25 and the M3 is equivalent to 300 years' working time? I am not sure whether I believe that statistic, but would my hon. Friend care to comment on it?

Mr. Efford: My hon. Friend did not mention the condition in which people arrive at work after hours of driving on motorways and congested roads into the centre of London. One wonders why this issue has not been debated with enthusiasm in previous years—perhaps the emphasis on the car has dominated the debate on traffic congestion and public transport.

Air quality is another important issue for which a strategic approach across London is needed. I am a former chairman of the environment committee of Greenwich council and I played a part in the Londonwide network on air quality to tackle this issue. The problem is underlined by the growth in the number of young people in my local community who are suffering from asthma which is exacerbated by the poor quality of air, the main cause of which are the cars using the arterial routes which dissect the borough of Greenwich, and mainly my constituency.

Public health is another area where we need a strategic approach across London. We must address that matter in the White Paper in March next year and promote public health on a Londonwide basis. Homelessness and housing are also important. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North referred to trying to navigate the rocks of the quangos in London.

In economic development alone, the Green Paper lists no fewer than 17 governmental organisations, 16 private sector organisations, six education and training sector organisations, and 11 others. I will not bore hon. Members by reading them all out, as they can see for themselves the plethora of quangos and bodies that have been set up to try to tackle the democratic deficit in London and to provide services. For every £1 spent by a democratically elected authority, £60 is spent by an unaccountable quango. A strategic authority will provide some accountability in that area of public life.

Strategic planning across London for people with disabilities is an essential issue. London desperately needs a strategic approach to transport, planning, education and employment to improve the quality of life for disabled people.

The people of London have no one with a clear responsibility for London services to whom they can turn to express their views. The Bill will fill the gaping chasm that exists in accountability for London's public services and give the people of London a democratic voice. It will supply the deficit created by an act of political spite by the then Tory Government when they abolished the Greater London council, purely because they knew that the GLC would have remained under Labour control had they dared to face the electorate in 1986. That was illustrated by the results of the Inner London education authority elections following the demise of the GLC: Labour swept the board across the London boroughs.

The Tories' detestation of local government did not stop there: without a mandate from the electorate or any reference to the people of London, they went ahead in 1987 to abolish the ILEA.

Mr. McDonnell: The issue was indeed put to the electorate, because there were four by-elections at the end of the GLC, in which four GLC members stood down and risked the majority party's overall control. The London electorate returned them with resounding majorities, solely on the principle of opposition to the abolition of the GLC in 1986.

Mr. Efford: I could not agree more.

The parents of children in London schools had their own referendum on the future of the ILEA and more than 90 per cent. of those who voted—more than 50 per cent. of those eligible to vote—were in favour of retaining it. We will take no lectures from Conservative Members about accountability in a referendum or consultation with the people of London.

[Mr. Efford]

Following the devolution in Scotland and Wales, the people of London have every right to expect to be next. I am sure that on 7 May next year they will have their say and vote resoundingly in favour of restoring a democratic strategic authority—a right which was taken from them in a most undemocratic way by the previous Government. As we pledged in the general election campaign, the Government will restore a democratic voice for everyone in London.

9.18 pm

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I add my congratulations to those who made maiden speeches: the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) and, especially, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound), whose speech, according to his own description of what previously emanated from that constituency, will soon be regarded as forgettable.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles), who is an Essex Member, and to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley), for contributing to a debate on London government. The Scots would be even more grateful to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, given that they have no Conservative representation at all. However, it was good to see the official Opposition fielding contributors to this debate, in the absence of many London Members who one would have thought should be here to participate.

We heard one or two ironies from Opposition Members. One was the jibe that the *Evening Standard* was the only paper in London to support the Government's proposals for a strategic authority—I thought that the *Evening Standard* was the only paper in London to be sold at regional level, so its support is an endorsement of the Government's proposals for a strategic authority. It was also somewhat ironic and almost Pythonesque to hear to the official Opposition's jibing at the Greater London council—it was almost reminiscent of "Monty Python's Life of Brian"—and saying, "Well, what did the GLC ever do for us?" I am grateful to hon. Friends who have clearly outlined the number of services provided by the GLC to improve the quality of life in the capital and maintain a strategic fabric for the city—something that has been absent for these past 11 years. I was an employee of the GLC, as a member of the London fire brigade, for 23 years, and I am still an out-of-trade member of the Fire Brigades Union, of which I was an elected official.

I was equally disappointed that not one member of the official Opposition was present last week when the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) secured an Adjournment debate on the financial crisis facing the London fire service today as a legacy of the previous Government's approach to the service. The discussion was carried on by Liberal Democrat and Labour Members.

There has been a democratic deficit in the capital. I particularly welcome the fact that the Bill offers an opportunity to deal with London in a way that it has not been dealt with before, which offers it new politics for the capital and, indeed, a new start for this great city.

Mr. Stephen Twigg: In the light of the argument that my hon. Friend is pursuing, will he comment on the official Opposition's failure to respond to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), who is no longer present, as to how they would vote in the referendum if their amendment were unsuccessful? We had a clear answer from the Liberal Democrats that if their line of argument were unsuccessful they would support a yes vote. We did not get a similar answer when that question was put to the Conservatives.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for asking that question, which reinforces the point that I was making—the referendum and the directly elected mayor and assembly will provide an opportunity for us to reinvigorate and reinforce democracy. Contrary to the jibes that we have heard from the official Opposition that this measure is about weakening our democracy, Labour Members believe that it will improve and strengthen it in the way that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire requested.

The official Opposition have been asked a clear question. Despite the fact that their amendment will fall, they have not yet said whether they will support the prospect of strategic government for London. Obviously, that is simply a result of the embarrassment that they feel about the act of political spite that their colleagues carried out in 1986.

Mr. Hill: Is my hon. Friend aware that in the United States of America—a country notorious for the low turnout at elections and which has an extensive system of elected mayors—elections for mayors invariably generate turnouts in excess of 50 per cent., which is far higher than turnouts in British local elections? Does that not also reinforce my hon. Friend's argument that the election of a mayor for London is a means of renewing democracy in this country?

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that fact to my attention. I was not aware that that was the experience in the United States of America. Labour Members are certainly trying to reinvigorate our democracy by bringing new ideas and politics to the public's attention. We believe that having the referendum on the same day as people elect the 32 London local authorities will lead to an increase in the turnout, which cannot but be good for the future of London.

Ms Ryan: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that all Londoners are on the electoral roll? That is not currently the case. In the borough of Enfield, we have already held three consultations on the London strategic authority Green Paper, with an enormous positive response. Before entering the House, I was deputy leader in Barnet. I disagree with the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman). There was not universal approval by any means in Barnet for the abolition of the Greater London council, and there would certainly be enthusiasm for it now. I wonder whether the situation is much the same in my hon. Friend's neck of the London woods.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. It is clear that the attitude of the previous Government to local government was to reduce the resources offered to local government for providing decent services. Electoral registration has been one of the

casualties over the years. If local authorities had been given the necessary resources to do the job, areas of deficit, where people are not on the electoral roll for whatever reason, could have been addressed by more vigorous campaigns to ensure that people recognise that in a democratic society, it is their duty to participate by turning out at the polls and voting whenever an election is called. That is why the prospect of a referendum on 7 May next year is a reinforcing act.

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): After 1986, London became quangoland. It is always argued that what the Conservatives wanted to create would be more efficient. In fact, it has been most inefficient and very expensive. I hope that you will comment on that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman again used the word "you". I would be grateful if he would remember that that is not the terminology of the Chamber.

Dr. Vis: I apologise to you, Sir.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful question. The matter of quangos has been effectively addressed in the debate. The case has been strongly made that democracy was weakened by the initiation of so many quangos to take the place of the GLC and the Inner London education authority. To return London to democratic control and government will address the deficit and improve the situation.

Mr. McDonnell: My hon. Friend mentioned resources. Does he agree that, while there may be no second question on taxation, when we come to the main Bill we must tackle the crucial issue of the resourcing of the strategic authority to ensure that the powers to be exercised by the mayor and assembly can be exercised effectively through adequate resourcing? Will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Minister to consider issues such as virement between budgets in the authority and the potential for restoring business rates to London, or at least to a return to some formula which creates equity for London in terms of taxation and distribution across the country? The Minister should also consider change over time so that the authority will be adequately resourced.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing those matters to the attention of the House. I recognise his expertise in the field. I am sure that those matters will be addressed.

My last point concerns the home for the elected mayor and strategic authority. I suggest that east London would be an appropriate venue.

Mr. Pound: What about Ealing, North?

Mr. Fitzpatrick: The case for Ealing, North has been effectively made but we would be flying in the face of history were we to do something about Ealing, North now.

The Anglo-French summit that took place at Canary Wharf last week clearly signalled the symbolism that the Government attach to the east end. I have spoken of the need to reinforce our democracy, and one should remember that the east end has traditionally been the poor relation of the capital; its flirtation with the extremists of the right resulted from that neglect and the poverty and unemployment that it has suffered. The centre of gravity of the capital has been moving eastward in the past 15 years, and it will continue to do so. There is no more fitting place to be home to the new strategic authority and the elected mayor than east London.

9.30 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I congratulate the three hon. Members who made their maiden speeches.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) paid generous tribute to his predecessor, Charles Goodson-Wickes, a good friend of mine, whom we miss very much in the House. I am envious of the fact that the hon. Gentleman is able to represent his home constituency.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) made the most entertaining maiden speech that I have ever heard. I note from his interests as listed in "The Times Guide to the House of Commons", May 1997 edition, that he is a collector of comics, so perhaps that humour should come as no surprise. He, too, paid generous tribute to Harry Greenway, who is held in much affection in the House. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that he is not as tall as my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), but he most definitely made his mark with his speech. Speaking of my right hon. Friend, I noted that the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) intervened on the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) and urged him to support the licensing of minicabs.I hope that both hon. Members will be present when my right hon. Friend introduces his private Member's Bill later in the Session to propose such a measure. I hope that they also note that that is a Conservative party proposal.

We had an excellent maiden speech from my good and hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). In common with everyone else in the House, I, too, tramped the streets of Uxbridge. Unlike the majority of those in the Chamber, but in common with my hon. Friend, I hope that the Prime Minister takes it upon himself to maintain his tradition of attending every by-election by visiting Beckenham and Winchester.

As my hon. Friend's Whip, I have some idea of the emotions he went through when, on 1 May, he found himself electing his candidate, his good friend Michael Shersby, and when, just three months later, he found himself standing in his place. It must have been a traumatic experience, but he has come through it with flying colours and we welcome him to the House.

We are debating a Bill which provides for a referendum on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. That is it. The future of London will be wrapped up in a single 24-word question, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) has rightly said, is arguably defective. London is a city which hon. Members are proud to represent and it does not deserve this.

One of the Conservative party's proudest achievements in government was to see Londoners turn their city into one of the world's greatest cities. That success has

[Mr. Richard Ottaway]

become apparent not just since May. *[Interruption.]* The Deputy Prime Minister may jeer, but the first sentence of his manifesto refers to London as the greatest city.

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): The Conservative Government abolished London's council.

Mr. Ottaway: I shall come to that in a minute.

That success has been achieved not just since May; it is a success story of the past two decades—a Conservative success story. London is now one of the world's leading financial centres. Its theatres, cinemas, museums and art galleries and its venues for opera—we hope—and for dance and music are internationally acclaimed. Its universities are world class. The latest survey reveals that it maintains its leading position as the best city in Europe in which to locate a business.

Those hon. Members who spoke about the need to consider our transport systems should note that the same poll contained a supplementary question about transport, and business men voted London the easiest European city to travel around. We may think that it is bad, but the others are even worse. However, we share the Government's view that the time has come to reform and modernise our capital's system of government—to build on the tremendous success story and prosperity achieved during the Conservatives' time in government.

Labour Members have criticised us for changing our minds on this proposal. That is rich coming from the Labour party, which has changed its mind on every fundamental issue of the past two decades and a fair few since the general election. Let us hear no criticism from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg): as president of the National Union of Students, he advocated resistance to tuition fees, but he seems to have gone strangely silent on the subject. *[Interruption.]* We will be watching him.

Many hon. Members have argued that it was a mistake to abolish the Greater London council in 1986, but I am not one of those people. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Mr. Pickles) rightly pointed out, to apologise presupposes that we want to return to the GLC. In paragraph 1.09 of the Green Paper, the Government state:

"This is not an exercise in bringing back the Greater London Council",

so the Labour party does not want it back. That leaves only the Liberals and I am not sure that they want it back either. Who is urging the House to advocate a return to the GLC?

Mr. McDonnell: An apology is required because the Conservative party was given the opportunity, by all parties on the GLC, by Londoners and by many London organisations, to reform the GLC instead of abolishing it. However, in a pig-headed way and showing a cowardly lack of interest in London, Conservative Members marched through the Division Lobbies to obey the diktat of the then Prime Minister. That is what the hon. Gentleman should apologise for.

Mr. Ottaway: I do not lament the departure of the old GLC any more than the hon. Gentleman's own party does and I will not apologise for the abolition of what was a dinosaur running out of control.

We recognise that things have moved on since that time. I accept that 10 years is a long time in politics—the world has become a global village and we need a mayor to stride around the village square. However, Labour Members have to realise what the proposed authority will not do. Many hon. Members have referred to elected mayors in the United States and to the powers of the mayor of New York, but it is an illusion to believe that the success of the mayor of New York can be drawn down as an analogy with what is proposed for London. If Labour Members believe that our mayor will be able to solve problems in the same way as the mayor of New York has done, they have another think coming.

The mayor of New York's great success was his crackdown on crime. That was achieved by the introduction of a law banning squeegee merchants who were funding juvenile crime and the imposition of a sales tax to put extra policemen on the beat, who were then targeted at the worst areas. No such powers will be available to the mayor of London or to the assembly and it is illusory to think that they will. The hon. Member for Eltham brought the debate down to the level of road humps—the authority would decide which borough had road humps—and other hon. Members wanted the authority to deal with health and education, but that will not happen either.

The Bill will give London's 5 million voters the chance to vote in a referendum on the plans for a Greater London authority. The authority has two parts: first, a directly elected mayor and, secondly, a directly elected assembly. Two options, two proposals, two choices—so why are the Government introducing a Bill that offers only one question? Londoners now find themselves in an impossible position; the future government of their city is at stake, yet the Government continue to ignore the variety and depth of their cosmopolitan views. London is a city of villages—varied, colourful and, at times, awkward. It has the energy of New York, without the downside. It has many opinions and Londoners want their say. Two choices demand two questions. It is democratic, it is necessary and it is right. That is why the Conservatives are fighting for a two-question referendum—so that the people of London can be given the fullest possible opportunity to have their say about the sort of London government that they want.

I have been canvassing in my constituency and in the rest of London. I accept that there is wide support for a voice for London, but hardly anyone agrees with the detail of the Government's proposals. Indeed, most speeches this evening have disagreed with the detail.

Mr. Raynsford: Nonsense.

Mr. Ottaway: Yes, they have. The hon. Member for Ealing, North wanted the GLC back, even though the Green Paper was against that. The hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) wanted health and education to be run by the proposed authority. I could list many more examples.

By all means let us have a mayor for London; on that our parties can agree. He or she will be an ambassador for the city, a strong voice for its people, a champion of Londoners promoting London on the national and international stage. The mayor could push the capital's case on issues ranging from inward investment

to regeneration funding, and could bid for the World cup or the Olympic games. It is obvious to all of us who live and work in London that the capital's environmental problems are challenging. Together, we produce more than 12 million tonnes of rubbish and use more than 20 million tonnes of fuel a year. From rubbish to graffiti to recycling, the influence that a mayor would bring to bear on overseeing a new environmental strategy would be enormous.

The last thing that London—or the mayor—needs, however, is a directly elected assembly—the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley). The assembly will generate an anti-borough culture; the boroughs are deeply concerned about its scope for interference in their activities. In the Green Paper there are no fewer than 15 diminutions of the boroughs' powers, and in part II of the Bill the Government seek authority to obtain advice on the assembly's electoral arrangements. The relevant clause does not specify the method of election, although the Minister dealt with that earlier today.

In his letter to *The Times*, the Minister argued that he intends to avoid the problem of assemblymen fighting for their own patches rather than the wider interests of London—

Ms Hodge *rose—*

Mr. Ottaway: I will not give way at this point.

Not even Scotland and Wales are breaking their constituency links in this manner. By maintaining that the assembly must think strategically and not take local views into account, the Minister is saying, in effect, "Vote us in; we need your votes, and then we don't want to hear from you."

Mr. Raynsford: The purpose of my letter to *The Times* was to point out the deficiencies of the Conservative party's proposal that the mayor should not have a directly elected assembly to keep him or her accountable, but should instead have a committee made up of all 32 London borough leaders. I was pointing out, as did another correspondent in that newspaper the same day—someone expert in the American system—that *The Times* was wrong and that there was no American city that did not have an assembly to keep its mayor accountable. I also pointed out that the 32 borough leaders could not do so because they would be fighting for their own interests.

Mr. Ottaway: Then the Minister let the cat out of the bag—he could not contain himself—and went even further. He said that he wanted the authority to think strategically—

Mr. Raynsford: Absolutely.

Mr. Ottaway: Fair enough; but he also said that he did not want the assemblymen to fight for their own patch. If so, I repeat: the Minister simply wants people's votes, but thereafter he does not want to hear any more from them.

I think that the Coulsdon bypass for Croydon is important, but no one in the assembly would fight for it. Who is to fight for it then—a Member of Parliament, a councillor? If so, what is the point of the authority?

Ms Hodge: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ottaway: No, I am short of time.

We will have a load of assemblymen with no local knowledge and no constituency links; their only job will be to hang around and veto the mayor or his appointees. The assembly will become a hotbed of intrigue and gossip, and the only way for assemblymen to draw attention to their dull careers will be to say no to the mayor. The temptation will be irresistible. It will lead to clash and conflict, gridlock and indecision. Vetoes will be overridden. The headlines will be endless.

Neither the mayor nor the boroughs need to work with another layer of bureaucracy when London is already so well served by its present elected representatives. In addition to the Government office for London and the London development agency, we shall have 32 unitary boroughs, the Corporation of London, 74 Members of Parliament and 10 Members of the European Parliament.

Labour Members spoke with affection of the old Greater London council, an organisation of which many hon. Members need no reminding. A unique band of Labour Members held office in it, and I am sure that the House and the people of London will welcome their explanation why it cost more than £2 billion a year to run with so little output and why it spent £8,000 on the campaign to curb police powers, £30,000 on the Camden policing the police group and £38,000 on the campaign against the Police Bill.

Perhaps we should ask the hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), now Under-Secretary of State for Health. He should know; he was chairman of the Greater London council police committee at the time. Or we might ask his neighbour, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), noticeable by his absence tonight, who is campaigning against his party's proposals. We could even ask the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), the Minister for Sport, a man who, after the Greater London council's abolition, mysteriously found the GLC's silver in his attic at home. He was the last chairman of the Greater London council. We do not want a return to those old days; we must avoid it at all costs.

The Conservative party wants an indirectly elected assembly, made up of a representative of each of the 32 London boroughs and the Corporation of London. Whichever way one looks at them, our proposals for that assembly of borough leaders constitute an arguable case. *The Guardian*, not traditionally a Conservative newspaper, said:

"to deny them"—

those with alternative views—

"any expression on the ballot seems peculiar. After all, the whole point of a referendum is to allow all the people their say."

Borough leaders are the men and women who have day-to-day contact with boroughs and wards, working with chief executives to solve local problems. To have them form the new assembly would be to build a bridge between the boroughs and the mayor. It will provide a vital link with the electors and ensure that those with all-important local knowledge will be at the heart of decision making. It will remove the inevitable conflict between the authority and the boroughs on planning, transport and much else. It will provide effective scrutiny, tempered with responsibility.

The Minister today—as he has in the past—criticised our proposal for an assembly made up of 32 borough leaders and the Corporation of London as an inadequate alternative to the assembly. However, he totally failed to explain why

[Mr. Ottaway]

32 elected assemblymen would be better equipped to contain the excesses of a mayor than the 32 borough leaders. It does not show much confidence in local government or in his party. The majority of borough leaders are Labour councillors, and not one speech today mentioned their work—I am not surprised, looking at them.

Mr. Fitzpatrick: Too long.

Mr. Ottaway: The Prime Minister insists that we are in a giving age, so why does not he give the people of London a two-question referendum? Anything less would be a deliberate and calculated slap in the face of democracy. Two simple, straightforward questions that would reveal the true views of Londoners about their future—that is all it would take. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members are complaining about the length of my speech. I remind them that the agreement is that the Minister wants only 10 minutes in which to reply, so I have two minutes to go.

Two simple, straightforward questions that would reveal the true views of Londoners about their future—that is all it would take. London's future is too important to the Opposition for us to fight for anything less. Two questions would show that the Government have nothing to hide about reforming the capital's government. With the Liberal Democrats supporting us, the Government could point to all-party consensus on the issue. That would show that the Government had confidence in the electorate's ability to assess the merits of each proposal before them, and that the Government really wanted to listen to Londoners' views.

One question on a referendum simply shows that the Government do not really want to know—that they have something to hide. Are they afraid to dig a little deeper? Are they just not interested in finding out what Londoners think about those reforms? The Minister probably knows how many Londoners think that Labour's way is not the best way to reform London's government.

The Conservative party wants two questions on London's future—two choice for two futures. Those who live in the world's greatest capital city deserve nothing less. I urge the House to support our amendment.

9.49 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): As other hon. Members have said, we have been privileged to listen to three maiden speeches today. The speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) was notable for both its wit and its entertainment value. While bewailing the historic lack of great people, buildings and events in his constituency, he happily heralded a better future for his constituents with a strategic authority of the kind proposed by the Government. His speech was hailed as being witty in the extreme, while the speeches by the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway), the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) win tonight's comedy cup.

For Opposition Members to argue that we are failing to offer the people of London a genuine choice in our desire to restore to them a democratic voice, when the Conservative party summarily abolished democratic citywide government in London without previously consulting the people of London, is risible in the extreme. Since then, Londoners have been at one in demanding the return of their democratic voice. This Government were elected on a manifesto promise to bring back democratic government to our capital. With the approval of the people of London, that is what we shall undoubtedly do.

I welcomed the positive contributions from both sides of the House to a debate in June on the government of London. This evening's debate seems to have broken down into a clear commitment by the Labour party to the restoration of a democratic voice for London, while Opposition Members have displayed no clear vision, constantly referring to history and misrepresenting our ideas by suggesting erroneously that we wish to create a GLC mark II.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) and the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) spoke today, as they did in June, from an interested and informed position, and asked specific questions. I understand that the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster is probably enjoying the dessert or savoury at the Lord Mayor's banquet. He asked what provision there would be if it were necessary to have a recount in the referendum. There will be provision by Orders in Council, should that necessity arise.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet asked several specific questions, particularly on the rights of European Union nationals to vote in the referendum. They will indeed have that right. The result will be announced borough by borough, and then the total will be announced. Counting officers will determine the number of boxes and the number of people required to count the votes. I cannot understand why the hon. Gentleman believes that there could be any confusion about the voting procedure when the ballot paper says:

" mayor and a separately elected assembly".

"Separately" is the operative word.

Since July, we have received more than 1,000 responses from all parts of London, representing business, local government, trade unions, community groups and others. Many responses have come from individual Londoners who want a say in their city's future. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) referred to electoral reform. We are still attempting to assess the responses on that point.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) asked for this debate to be conducted with an open mind, but he ended up—as far as I could understand—discounting his own reasoned amendment. He therefore seemed to be asking less for an open mind than for empty minds. Of the responses that we have managed to analyse, only 10 per cent. have put in a request for an additional question. However, the responses are still being considered and analysed. It is clear that the people of London do not want simply to re-create the old GLC, the abolition of which made Londoners particularly determined to have their democratic voice restored. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There are many conversations going on in the Chamber. Hon. Members should be listening to the Minister.

Ms Jackson: Our proposal is that we should learn from the experience in other world cities, draw on the best that is on offer and look carefully at what London needs.

The hon. Member for Northolt, in his reasoned response, although he does not agree with our proposals, asked why my hon. Friend—

Mr. Wilkinson: There is no Member for Northolt. Northolt is in the constituency of one of my hon. Friends. I presume that the hon. Lady is referring to the Member for Ruislip-Northwood. If she concentrated more on the debate, and read less and gabbled less, she might get such points of detail right.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady is in perfect good order.

Ms Jackson: I thank the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) for demonstrating that he is always one of the most courteous hon. Members. He said that my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction had not mentioned a strategic transport authority. My hon. Friend certainly did so. He referred to the need for a strategic transport authority, a need reiterated from direct practical experience by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford). My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) emphasised the point in a telling intervention.

If a start is to be made, London needs the strategic leadership that can be provided only by a mayor who is directly elected by, and speaks for, the people, and who is capable of bringing all of London together. It also needs an assembly capable of scrutinising, questioning and holding the mayor to democratic account, creating a proper balance of accountability, but also capable of advising the mayor and contributing ideas and expertise in regular dialogue.

The two proposals are inseparable. Neither on its own would provide the mix of leadership and accountability that London needs. That was stressed in almost all the contributions of Labour Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) described the proposed referendum question as realistic. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) highlighted our manifesto commitment to a strategic authority and a directly elected major.

In a maiden speech that was generous and graceful in the tribute that was paid to his predecessors, my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) underlined the multicultural nature of his constituency, and emphasised the need for a strategic transport authority.

The third maiden speech that we were privileged to hear was that of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall), who paid a moving tribute to his predecessor.

In his cogent and informed speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate highlighted the democratic element inherent in our manifesto commitment. My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) welcomed our manifesto commitment, as we welcome her call for voter registration to be encouraged, particularly among young voters.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) had serious doubts about our proposals, yet he, too, looked forward to our White Paper, which we have given a clear commitment to publish next year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) spoke of the mandate for change vested in the Government and the clear commitment in our manifesto to a new deal for London, with a strategic authority and directly elected mayor.

I referred earlier to the contribution of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, who seemed to fear our proposals, which he thought would suck away power from local authorities. That was a somewhat remarkable contribution in view of the fact that, over 18 long years, the former Conservative Government introduced 60 separate Bills that took powers away from London government.

I regret that I cannot name all the Labour Members who made a clear, passionate commitment to what we propose and what we intend to see delivered.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 167, Noes 342.

Division No. 85] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael

Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. James Cran and
Sir David Madel.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fatchett, Derek
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenniler *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali

Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. John McFall.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—*[Ms Glenda Jackson.]*

Question agreed to.

Committee tomorrow.

GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY (REFERENDUM) BILL [*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging on and payment out of the Consolidated Fund of—

(a) any fee payable to, or charge made or expenditure incurred by, the Chief Counting Officer, a counting officer or a returning officer which is to be charged on and paid out of that Fund by virtue of an Order in Council under the Act; and

(b) any grant payable by the Secretary of State under the Act to a London borough council or the Common Council of the City of London in respect of expenditure incurred (or to be incurred) by them by virtue of an Order in Council under the Act;

(2) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure of the Secretary of State in connection with the referendum held by virtue of the Act (other than expenditure authorised by paragraph (1) above to be charged on and paid out of the Consolidated Fund);

(b) any payments made by the Secretary of State under the Act to the Local Government Commission for England; and

(c) any expenditure of the Secretary of State in preparation for a Greater London Authority.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Question agreed to.

House of Commons Members' Fund

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That Mr. John Butterfill, Dr. Vincent Cable, Mr. Barry Gardiner, Dr. Nick Palmer, Dr. Howard Stoate and Ms Gisela Stuart be appointed Managing Trustees of the House of Commons Members' Fund in pursuance of Section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 1939.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

10.15 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I would have expected an explanation of the proposed composition of a body that touches on the interests of all hon. Members. When I have said just a few words on the subject, I hope that one might be forthcoming. It seems rather odd, to say the least, not to have a balance of representation on such a body, which represents the interests of Members in the widest possible context.

We are used to deputing colleagues with certain specialist knowledge of to deal with various matters, but here we have a matter that touches on the interests of Members themselves. I am seeking an explanation because I am puzzled that the proposed Labour Members dealing with the House of Commons Members' fund all appear—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There is far too much conversation in the Chamber.

Mr. Forth: The proposed Labour Members all appear to have been elected recently. I do not wish to criticise them as individuals; indeed, I am rather impressed that they are prepared to take on the onerous responsibility dealing with a matter as potentially sensitive as the House of Commons Members' fund so early in their parliamentary careers. However, Members would have expected a spread of experience on such a body so that the Members dealing with the matter could have offered knowledge, experience and perhaps a length of service in the House.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) is a proposed trustee. That pleases me enormously, not least because my hon. Friend entered the House at the same time as I did in 1983. His wide range of experience in the House and outside will enable him to make a real contribution to the deliberations that will take place from time to time on the House of Commons Members' fund. That is encouraging.

On the other hand, although I am encouraged by the presence of my hon. Friend, I am somewhat at a loss to understand why the Government, given the opportunity to offer a range of experience, have failed to do so. At the very least, surely we are owed an explanation. I am not saying that I wish to divide the House—

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): Get on with it.

Mr. Forth: Does the hon. Gentleman wish to intervene? *[Interruption.]* I am glad that I am now beginning to arouse some interest among Labour Members, which is a rarity.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. All the right hon. Gentleman needs to worry about is that I am interested in what he is saying—and I am listening—and that he keeps to the point.

Mr. Forth: I hope that I have kept very much to the point. I am sure that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, would agree that this matter bears very much on Members' interests. I am very much encouraged to see—I suspect that it is largely because of such interests—the large number of Members who are unusually present on the Government Benches. This is certainly a novelty. It may be—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Let me warn the right hon. Member that this is a very tight subject. He must stick to it. How many Members are in the Chamber is of no consequence to this debate. He knows the subject, he has risen to speak on it and he must speak to it.

Mr. Forth: Of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you are right. Indeed, you are, by definition, right. I am talking about Members and I confess that I allowed myself to stray to Labour Members. As you say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the point is very narrow, but it is important.

What disappoints me about the way in which the matter has been offered to the House is the fact that the Government have not been prepared even to offer the simplest, almost elementary, explanation of the composition proposed for the body that deals with the House of Commons Members' fund. I suspect that, if we had had that explanation, the matter could have been dealt with in a very straightforward way. Given that it has been presented to us on the Order Paper and moved formally, should the House be surprised if Members such as myself—I do not know whether any of my hon. Friends share my concern about the matter—wonder at the very least why we are not being offered a range of experience among Members on the body? Is it too much to ask that Members from different election intakes are represented? The House of Commons Members' fund deals with matters in which all Members have an interest. I should have preferred Members of greater experience on the body.

I have no doubt that if we are given a reasonable explanation, we shall be prepared to accept it. In the absence of a reasonable explanation, we may want the matter to be deferred, thought about again, taken away and dealt with, no doubt in the usual expert and, very often, companionable way, through the usual channels. I regret to say that, if I am not given that reassurance, we may want to divide the House not only to make the point that this is the wrong way in which to bring such a matter before the House—it is almost insulting—but to get more reassurance that the Members who are being proposed to deal with the fund will have a greater range of experience than those who are currently proposed.

I hope that, in those very few words, I have been able to encourage someone on the Government Benches to come forward and give us the explanation. I await that with eager anticipation.

10.22 pm

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Despite the fact that I sense irritation from Labour Members who do not want to discuss this matter, it strikes me that it is sufficiently serious for us to spend some time on it. It would be wrong simply to nod it through without giving it decent consideration.

If I understand you correctly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are dealing only with the first of two motions on the Order Paper. I am sure that it will be necessary for the House to

have a sensible and rational debate subsequently about the contributory pension fund, but, for the moment, we are talking solely about the Members' fund. It is a fund to which every hon. Member contributes and which all of us one day—Heaven forbid—may wish to use. We should therefore take it seriously. Some answers to some questions should be given before we vote on the matter. I shall pose a number of questions to which I would like answers before I decide whether to divide the House on the issue.

First, why are we being asked to approve six trustees? I notice that when we come to debate the next motion, we will be asked to approve eight trustees and the House should be told the reason for the difference. We should be told why six will be adequate for the task. If six trustees are considered adequate, we must reassure ourselves that the work load for those six people is right. If there is much work to be done, we will need more than six. Secondly, may we be told the exact work load of the trustees? What will the trustees decide and how often will they have to meet?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The motion is only about the membership of the body, not its work load. The House is being asked to approve the membership and the individual names.

Mr. Wilshire: I understand that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I hope that you will understand in return that to make up my mind about whether the membership level is right, I need an understanding of the task facing the six people. Otherwise, I will find it difficult to vote one way or the other. We need to get to grips with the work load.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the matter is covered by an Act of the House. If he wants to know the work load and the commitment, he should read the Act. We are considering only the six names before us.

Mr. Wilshire: I am grateful for that advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When some of my friends speak subsequently, I will have a chance to read the Act. After I have read it, it may be necessary for me to seek to intervene to clear up such matters. For the moment, I fully understand your ruling and I will therefore talk about whether it is right for us to approve the six names.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Does the hon. Gentleman object to the name of the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill)? If he does not, to which members of the body has he taken exception?

Mr. Wilshire: If the hon. Gentleman can contain himself for a moment, I have it in mind to come to exactly that point. In due course, I will no doubt solve his worries. *[Interruption.]* Does the hon. Gentleman wish to intervene again?

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I have noticed that only one of the six names was a Member of Parliament before 1 May this year. I wish to make it clear that I mean no criticism of individuals. I am sure that all the other five are deeply worthy Members of Parliament, but they lack any understanding of the working of the House before 1 May. We must understand that the people who will apply for help from the Members' fund are those who were Members in the past, not those who serve at the present.

Mr. Forth: Lest the House imagine that my hon. Friend is being uncharitable, I ask him to agree that one hon. Member from this year's intake would be appropriate—perhaps even two—to bring a fresh perspective on matters. I share his objection that so many new Members will mean that the body is unrepresentative and that that is taking an unnecessary risk with something as sensitive as the matter before us.

Mr. Wilshire: Like the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), my right hon. Friend anticipates some of the points that I wish to make as my speech progresses. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need a fresh view on these matters, and one would not object to one, two or maybe three new Members on the Committee.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my hon. Friend accept that some new Members take the view that there is a world of difference between a fresh view and a view without foundation, and that many of us would not wish to see too many new Members on the Committee?

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend is right, and he is exactly the sort of new Member that I would wish to see on the Committee. I commend him to the Government as a potential replacement for some of the names that they have put forward to represent the Labour party view.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Can my hon. Friend explain the precedent for the matter? Has this body typically consisted of entirely new Members or has it been more balanced?

Mr. Wilshire: To the best of my knowledge, the fund was treated with the respect it deserves when there was a Conservative Administration. Trustees with experience and knowledge—and who could recall the service of those people who would be applying for help from the fund—were appointed. It is a poor show if the best that Labour can do is to put forward four very worthy people with no knowledge of the workings of the House before 1 May and no direct experience of the former Members who might be seeking help from the fund.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Is my hon. Friend aware that three of the trustees during the last Parliament were Privy Counsellors, all of them distinguished Members with a long record of service? This is a departure from the precedent of the last Parliament, and my hon. Friend is right to insist on an explanation from the Government.

Mr. Wilshire: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. If the Labour Government cannot bring themselves to provide people with experience, understanding and compassion, it suggests that they have nothing but contempt for what happened before 1 May. That worries me greatly because of the nature of the fund, which is all about care and compassion for former Members from all parties. We now have a Labour Government who treat the care and compassion of former Members with contempt.

[Mr. Wilshire]

If I am wrong, no doubt the Government will give me a good explanation of why these four new Labour Members are the right people to appoint to the Committee. If I receive a good explanation, I shall be happy to accept it.

It is not only the Labour party which has taken this view—we have one name from the Liberal Democrats. Before 1 May, there were one or two Liberal Democrat Members—perhaps they have a few more now. It is surely not beyond the bounds of possibility that the Liberal Democrats could show care and compassion to former Members by putting up the name of someone with long service in this House. I have no disrespect for the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable), who I am sure is a worthy person who will do a first-class job. But why has the experience of the past been ignored by the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): At the serious risk of prolonging a particularly tedious and pointless debate, may I point out that the Liberal Democrat Member who has been nominated has wide experience outside the House, has knowledge of the issues to be dealt with by the Committee and is thoroughly suitable? When it comes to establishing a Committee—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Is this an intervention?

Mr. Stunell: Yes, it is an intervention, and the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) gave way to me.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Interventions must be very brief. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) is verging on speaking about the qualities of hon. Members. As far as I am concerned, each and every individual in the House is a caring individual, so let us hear no more about qualities.

Mr. Wilshire: I understand your point, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We need to pursue the question of experience. I entirely understand the inexperience of the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) and I was enjoying his intervention. I was rather disappointed that you cut him short, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because I wanted to hear what he had to say. What he said—and it is important that we see it in *Hansard* in the morning—is that the Members' fund is pointless, and that it is pointless for us to consider the problems that arise for former Members of Parliament. If that is Liberal Democrat policy I am glad that I gave way and got it on the public record.

Labour Members are clearing out, either because they cannot face criticism or because they have gone to look up the answers—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I stated earlier that who is or is not in the Chamber is absolutely irrelevant and does not matter. The motion is very tight—it refers to six names—and I do not want to hear about anything else from the hon. Gentleman or anyone else who cares to make a contribution.

Mr. Wilshire: I was doing my level best to focus the attention of the House, or at least of the few Labour Members who are still here and the larger number of Conservative Members, on those six hon. Members. It is crucial that we are told why only one of the six has any experience of the workings of the House and of Members of Parliament before 1 May this year. It is a serious matter which calls for experience, and new Members, however well intentioned, do not have that experience.

Mr. Hayes: Much has been said about the new Members, but we have heard nothing about them specifically. Mr. Deputy Speaker has told us that the motion concerns six individuals. Could we hear some more, at some length, about their curricula vitae?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not for the hon. Gentleman to direct another hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Wilshire: My hon. Friend made a fair point. As I understand it, others of my hon. Friends want to address the detailed points about the individual trustees. It is for me to raise the general questions in advance. I believe that I have done that. I have set out the questions that the Government must answer to satisfy me. There are many other questions and I should be grateful if the Leader of the House could answer them all.

10.38 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): Conservative Members' contributions have been extremely interesting. They are obviously preparing to be former Members, or they would not be so interested in the provisions of the pension fund.

I treat with great seriousness the concerns expressed by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). That is a new constituency for him. I remember talking to him when he was not so sure about his future in the House—we discussed redundancy payments—but that is not a matter for this evening. I know that he is concerned about these issues.

I take seriously any reservations that hon. Members have about the membership of such bodies. If Conservative Members have concerns, they could have raised them with their Front Benchers and the usual channels with whom such arrangements are made. For my part—

Mr. Forth: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you clarify for the House that the motion, which the Order Paper states can be debated for up to one and a half hours, is debatable and, therefore, that it is in order for hon. Members to raise these matters and to ask legitimate questions about them? The Leader of the House seems to be implying that that is not the case.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Of course, the motion is debatable. That is why I allowed the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) to speak and that is why I am allowing the Leader of the House to speak. The right hon. Lady is in perfect order at the moment.

Mrs. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, I have looked at the list of those nominated from the Labour Benches and have been extremely impressed by the expertise of the new Members whom

we have been able to nominate. I would have had every confidence in those Labour Members. If the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and his Conservative colleagues do not have confidence in the person whom the Opposition have nominated through the usual channels, I am perfectly willing to take the matter back to the usual channels and look at it again. On that basis, perhaps it is best that I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That—

(1) The following Standing Order (Environmental Audit Committee) be made:

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

(1) There shall be a select committee, called the Environmental Audit Committee, to consider to what extent the policies and programmes of government departments and non-departmental public bodies contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development; to audit their performance against such targets as may be set for them by Her Majesty's Ministers; and to report thereon to the House.

(2) The committee shall consist of fifteen members, of whom four shall be a quorum.

(3) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(4) The committee shall have power—

(a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from time to time;

(b) to appoint specialist advisers to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference;

(c) to communicate its evidence and any other documents relating to matters of common interest to any committee appointed by this House or by the Lords; and

(d) to meet concurrently with any committee appointed under Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments), or any sub-committee thereof, or with any committee appointed by the Lords, or any sub-committee thereof, for the purposes of deliberating or examining witnesses.'

(2) Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended, in line 27, after the word 'Accounts', by leaving out the word 'and', and in line 28, after the word 'Committee', by inserting the words 'and to the Environmental Audit Committee'.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

Court Closures (Essex)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

10.41 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): When I first decided on this debate, I thought that only the county of Essex was subject to court closures of such magnitude, but, as we have heard in recent weeks and, indeed, this afternoon, magistrates courts are closing throughout the country. It could be said that the magistrates court system, which has evolved over centuries, is being systematically dismantled. That policy is driven by the Treasury and it will lead to fewer, larger courts and to almost a production-line distribution of justice. That is not what local justice is all about.

Essex courts have suffered cuts totalling £1 million in the past three years, on a budget of £7 million. The evidence shows that the object of the exercise is to reduce the number of courts in the county to five, although Essex has one of the largest populations of any shire county.

What is the object of the exercise? The consultation process has shown that everyone is against the court closures save the Crown Prosecution Service and the magistrates courts organisers. In other words, this is all about the convenience of the bureaucrats rather than the distribution of justice in local communities.

It is a case of one side of Government saving money—or so it seems—but that is more than outweighed by the costs to other aspects of Government and to the community at large. The move is also contrary to the Government's policies on traffic reduction. It may seem strange to mention that while on the subject of court closures, but it is a serious question and it needs to be addressed because people will have to travel further.

The Government's policies of greater police presence and being tough on crime are being undermined by magistrates courts committees shutting courts. MCCs are, of course, quangos. In Essex, the quango has seven members, unelected and unrepresentative of the county. They are not there to respond to the wishes of hon. Members across the political divide or local councils. All those involved in the life of our magistrates courts are opposed to the closures, but the MCC meeting behind closed doors—so much for open government and accountability—made the decision to close.

I invite the Minister to comment on who knows best about the court system in the county of Essex: those who have to be there—solicitors, probation officers and, above all, the police—or the bureaucrats who run the system. We acknowledge that there are financial constraints on the public sector, but to save money on the one hand the public purse will pay far more on the other for a worse service. Except for the Crown Prosecution Service, whose reduced staffing will be helped by having fewer courts, nobody supports the closures envisaged in Essex.

The chief constable of Essex, Mr. John Burrow, wrote to me saying:

"I trust that you can bring to the attention of the House that this is not only a case where saving in one area of the criminal justice system will result in significant increased expenditure in other areas, but also there is a very real issue of the loss of local justice across large swathes of the County."

[Mr. Bob Russell]

Colchester is not going to lose its courts, at least not on current plans, but it will become a centre of courts for the whole of north Essex and further afield. In time, that will lead to the merger of the magistrates benches and to the loss of the local knowledge of local magistrates of local cases. Magistrates in Colchester will adjudicate cases from Clacton and Braintree, and vice versa.

The Minister noted:

"The magistracy deals with about 97 per cent. of criminal offices prosecuted in England and Wales. It also has important family and local licensing jurisdictions."

He also referred to the

"efficient and effective administration of the courts".—[*Official Report*, 29 October 1997; Vol. 299, c. 901.]

That is what it is all about. It is to do with the bureaucracy of the administration of the magistrates courts rather than fairness to the people involved.

There has been a range of media criticism. The courts at Halstead, Castle Hedingham and Southminster have been closed. Now Braintree, Clacton and Saffron Walden are under attack. Does the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) wish to intervene?

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Russell: The offer was there.

When the Minister replies, will he dissociate himself from the words of the director of central services at Essex magistrates court, Mr. Richard Hawkes? He said:

"There's been a lot of wild talk but we have had no evidence to support the claims"

of those opposing the closures. Among those who have opposed the closures is the chief constable of Essex, who stated:

"The decision will greatly inconvenience the victims of crime and witnesses who are required to attend court . . . but more importantly it will in the long-term undermine the very concept of local justice as there are now large areas of Essex that are without a local court."

That is what is happening in a county that has one of the largest populations in the country.

This afternoon, other hon. Members expressed their concern because their local magistrates courts were to close. It is clear that the Government are pursuing a systematic closure scheme throughout England and Wales. Such closures fly in the face of the opposition of local Members, county and district councillors, members of the legal profession, the police and public opinion.

The closure of a magistrates court in any town means a loss of the concept of local justice. It also has large cost implications for the police force because of increased travelling expenses and increased overtime payments. The greatest cost, however, is that an officer is no longer available for ordinary operational duty on the streets of the home town because he or she has to travel to a distant court.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): The hon. Gentleman has quoted a suggestion from those who seek to close courts. A spokesman has said on BBC Radio Essex that the majority of those who appear before magistrates plead guilty. Surely that strikes at the argument of those who want to close those courts. People are entitled to justice within their locality and to be judged by those who know that locality.

Mr. Russell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Evidence suggests that some people are pleading guilty, by default, because it is a cheaper option than pleading their innocence at a faraway court. I do not believe that anyone would want to support such a system of justice.

Mr. Jenkin: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for inviting fellow Essex Members to take part in the debate and I associate myself with much of what he has said. In particular, removing the means of justice from the local community hardly seems to be in keeping with the message that everyone in the House wants to send to local communities about justice being at the heart of each of our communities.

The closure of such courts will not lead to super-enhanced services and better courts in the localities where they will remain. We will be left with the same courts, but they will be faced with additional strain and inadequate facilities. That can lead only to further congestion and delay in the process of justice. Although we have sympathy with the magistrates courts committee trying to live within its means, I put it to the Minister that that will hardly enhance the objective on law and order.

Mr. Russell: I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

We are witnessing production-line justice, which is not in keeping with what we would all like to see. The court closures will greatly inconvenience the victims of crime, and witnesses who are required to attend court. Such closures will destroy the concept of local justice according to which local magistrates make decisions on local cases.

Will the Minister make the quangos take proper account of public opinion? It is not good enough for one part of government to try to save money when, as a consequence, the police and society will end up worse off financially. The chief constable has said that the police service in Essex will be poorer because of the closures, and he knows his patch better than anyone in the House.

For the sake of Essex and all the other localities about which we are now hearing, I urge the Minister to rethink seriously whether it is in the interests of the Government's policies on crime, traffic reduction and overall spending to cut magistrates courts committees' funding so that they, in turn, reduce the number of courts in each locality. In the fulness of time, we in Essex will be left with five super-courts and a pick-and-mix magistrates bench. I urge the Minister to reconsider the whole concept of the systematic dismantling of the magistrates courts in this country.

10.54 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am most grateful to the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) for raising this topic, which is one of general concern in the county of Essex. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I draw your attention and that of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests as partner in a firm of solicitors.

I have recently met my hon. Friend the Minister, by way of leading a delegation to discuss with him the closure of Braintree magistrates court, and he will

remember the local feeling expressed on that occasion. The delegation included the leader of Braintree district council, which is unanimously opposed to the closure of the local court. More significantly, the leader of Witham town council, which would be the recipient town were Braintree magistrates court to close, also endorses the opposition to the closure. The reason for that is that towns need local justice, as the hon. Member for Colchester said.

The other member of the delegation was the chief constable of Essex who, as I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister recalls, expressed strong objection to the closure, not only of Braintree magistrates court but of courts in Clacton and Saffron Walden.

Angela Smith (Basildon): I wish to raise a matter connected with Clacton magistrates court, but first I should declare that my husband is a magistrate in Essex. Is my hon. Friend aware that there was a proposal in 1995 to refurbish Clacton court, which was turned down by the previous Government? Does he agree that it would be better to have refurbished the court then than to see it close now?

Mr. Hurst: I am grateful for that information, of which I was not aware. I agree entirely with my hon. Friend's remarks.

The chief constable of Essex was strongly of the view that any saving achieved in the magistrates service would pass the burden to the police, and the point was endorsed by the leader of Braintree district council. Consequent on the closure of Braintree county court, cases for possession and other district council cases are being heard in the magistrates court building. Were that to close, the estimated cost to the district council of moving on to Witham or Colchester would be about £12,000, which almost matches the anticipated savings of £14,000 from the closure of Braintree courthouse.

In closing, I am pleased to note that Essex county council has lodged an appeal and I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider that appeal sympathetically in due course. I urge him to seek to maintain local justice and civic pride and to save public money.

10.57 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): This is an important topic and I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I am sure that all those hon. Members present are delighted that the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) has initiated tonight's debate. The considerable interest that hon. Members have shown illustrates the importance of magistrates courts, their courthouses and the organisation of magistrates courts committees, as was indicated recently when I set out the Government's policy in that respect.

It is necessary at the outset to remind the hon. Member for Colchester that the Essex magistrates courts committee, in common with every other magistrates courts committee in the country, is solely responsible for the effective and efficient administration of the magistrates courts in its area. It is for magistrates courts committees, in consultation with the relevant paying authority—in this case, Essex county council—to determine how many courthouses and what other accommodation is needed locally. That is why it is wrong for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that there is anything systematic about court closures or that there is a policy in the Treasury or anywhere else to call for closures. This is a matter solely within the responsibility of local magistrates courts committees. Clearly, when resources are tight, it is the responsibility of the local committee to manage within available resources.

Whether a court should close is in the first instance a matter for the local magistrates courts committee—it is a local decision based on the committee's estimate of the needs of the local community. The only role that the Lord Chancellor has in these matters is to determine an appeal in the event that one is made. That is the limit of his jurisdiction.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Surely the Government's other role is in deciding on the available resources. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) has already said, the savings that the Government have got from the magistrates courts are being wasted in the policing budget. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should be looking at a more global accounting system.

Mr. Hoon: I intend to deal with resources in due course. The hon. Member for Colchester said that the removal of a magistrates court from any town also removed the concept of local justice. I invite him to think again about such an extravagant statement. Many towns across England and Wales have not had these courts for a very long time now; even in Essex, a number of towns have not had magistrates courts for some time. It is necessary for the local magistrates courts committee to make judgments about where best to locate its courthouses. Only in the event of that decision being challenged by the paying authority—Essex county council or any other paying authority—does the matter become the responsibility of the Lord Chancellor.

Essex magistrates courts committee made a formal determination to close Braintree, Clacton and Saffron Walden magistrates courts from 1 April 1998. There has been a lengthy debate this evening on why they should remain open. The paying authority has appealed to the Lord Chancellor against the closures, and those appeals have yet to be determined. That is why at this stage I cannot comment on the merits or otherwise of closing the courts.

I can, however, explain the procedures in place for each appeal. Each appeal against the decision of a magistrates courts committee to close a magistrates court is dealt with entirely on its own merits. I hope therefore to be able to give hon. Members a reasonable idea of some of the considerations that will ultimately be taken into account in determining these questions. They are the provision in the courts of modern facilities, such as facilities for the disabled; security arrangements for violent offenders; and separate waiting areas for defendants and witnesses.

The Government are particularly concerned to ensure the provision of courtrooms best suited to enable cases to be listed in a manner that will achieve the Government's aim of reducing delay in the criminal justice system. We also take account of the need for any renovations to bring the courthouse in question up to a modern standard. We are also aware of the distance people have to travel, of the cost of that travel, and of the time taken to complete the return journey.

[Mr. Hoon]

The Government are committed, however, to the better distribution and use of the considerable public resources that are allocated to magistrates courts committees as an integral part of the process of delivering justice. We want to provide a modern system of justice with well-equipped and secure courtrooms, to reduce delay in the time taken for cases to proceed through those courts, and thus to honour our manifesto commitments. Moreover, we are committed to remaining within the spending ceilings that we have inherited for the next two years, so I am unable to say that there will be any more money for the delivery of justice.

The real answer to the point about resources is that resources for the criminal justice system and legal aid inevitably have to compete with resources for education, the health service and other areas of Government spending that attract public support more readily. That is why the Government are committed to radical reform in the delivery of legal aid—to ensure that the Department that I represent can confidently compete for scarce taxpayers' money when the Government determine their spending priorities. Obviously, however, there may well be scope for drawing more value from what is, overall, a very large budget. The existence of a large number of small courts with inadequate facilities and limited potential to reallocate work and speed through decisions is hardly the efficient and forward-looking picture that any Government would like to see.

I remind hon. Members that there has been an extensive formal consultation process, carried out by Essex magistrates courts committee, which chose to consult more widely than the relevant statute requires.

Mr. Bob Russell: They ignored everyone.

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman's definition of "consult" is obviously different from the one that I am used to. To consult does not necessarily mean to agree with all the arguments advanced. Consultation means giving people the opportunity to advance arguments; whether those arguments are accepted is a matter for the authority consulting.

Essex magistrates courts committee invited comments on its proposals to close the three courthouses from all the local Members of Parliament, from the district councils and from the benches concerned, in addition to carrying out its formal statutory consultation, as legally required, with Essex county council. I understand that before that consultation took place the Essex magistrates courts committee considered how to make the best use of its accommodation, by assessing how many courtrooms it needed to meet its workload requirements. Apparently, the committee concluded that it has more courtrooms than it needs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) said, I had the considerable advantage of meeting him and my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich (Mr. Henderson) during a recent visit to the Essex magistrates courts committee. In addition, I have received a deputation with the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir A. Haselhurst). Each of those hon. Members advanced powerful arguments in defence of their local courts. Indeed, I was most impressed by the representations that I received during my visit to Essex. No Member of Parliament could do more to set out effectively the interests of their constituents.

In addition, I have received numerous letters from all parties interested in the future of these courthouses, setting out the difficulties that the proposed closures might cause. I must reassure the House that all those representations will be fully taken into account before a final decision is taken, and each appeal will be considered separately and on its merits.

Undoubtedly, one of the factors that will weigh heavily in the minds of those taking the decision is that work load is not the only factor to be taken into account. We must take into account the cost of running and maintaining the court, the standard of the accommodation, the length of any lease and the ability to renew it and the issue of rehousing. However, the costs and practical implications of running any court must be measured against the role that the court plays in providing a service to the public, and the effect and implications of providing an alternative for current users.

Leaving aside the very considerable costs of legal aid, the work of this country's principal courts and tribunals cost the taxpayer almost £800 million last year. It is our duty to ensure that money is well spent and well accounted for.

I should emphasise that the Government are especially anxious to reduce delays. That is one of our key manifesto pledges. It is important that courthouses are located and suited to enable cases to be listed in a way that helps to achieve our aim of reducing delays in the criminal justice system.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eight minutes past Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 11 November 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

National Health Service (Funding)

1. **Mr. Todd:** How much extra money has been made available to the Trent NHS region over the winter period. [13741]

2. **Jane Griffiths:** How much extra money has been made available for the NHS since 1 May. [13809]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): Since 1 May, the new Government, as part of their commitment to establishing a reliable and modern health service, have provided an additional £1.5 billion to the national health service—an extra £1.2 billion for next year and an extra £300 million for this winter. In the Trent region, £16 million extra has been provided for this winter to help with emergencies and restrain the rise in waiting lists.

Mr. Todd: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer, which will be welcome in my constituency. I hope that it will be possible to provide a breakdown of that expenditure to health authority level in the near future. Is my right hon. Friend aware that I met representatives of my local health authority shortly before his very welcome announcement and that they expressed concern about the mounting crisis this winter? I am sure that the money will be very well spent in our area.

Mr. Dobson: I can assure my hon. Friend that we will publish a detailed breakdown of the extra £16 million that is being provided to help the health service in the Trent region this winter. It is intended to help with emergencies and to finance local social services in taking steps to prevent old people from having to go into hospital unnecessarily and to take people out of hospital when, from their point of view and everyone else's, they are better off at home.

Jane Griffiths: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the announcement of the allocation of £73 million for the consolidation of the Royal Berkshire and Battle hospitals in my constituency—a project that was first discussed 67 years ago and on which almost nothing has been done for the past 18 years because of Tory inaction?

Mr. Dobson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. We very much welcome the commitment to the new hospital for Reading that has just been announced and the new hospital for Sheffield that was announced last week in addition to the 15 new hospital projects that we announced under the private finance initiative that we inherited from the previous Government. All they did was keep announcing that they would build new hospitals, but they never actually got around to it.

Mr. Hogg: Does the Secretary of State accept that, within the Trent region, there is particular concern about Grantham hospital because of the proposals by Lincolnshire health authority that will have a damaging effect on the paediatric department and other departments in that hospital? My hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) is particularly concerned about the matter. Does the Secretary of State accept that, should an appeal to him be successful, he may have to make additional funds available to Grantham hospital? Will he please make a reservation in his own mind now against that possibility?

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has made representations about Grantham hospital, as has the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies). I understand that the proposal will be passed to me by the people whom his Government appointed to run Lincolnshire health authority. I await the opportunity to adjudicate on their ideas.

Mr. Quentin Davies: The Secretary of State is wrong, because the chief executive of Lincolnshire health authority, whom the previous Government appointed, is now—I am glad to say—leaving his post, and is being replaced by Mr. Jeavons, a new appointee by the present Government.

May I reinforce the points already made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), because it is important that the future of the Grantham hospital is considered as a whole? We do not want decisions on individual units—in this case, the paediatric unit—to prejudice future decisions about other elements of the hospital. I therefore ask the Secretary of State to turn down the request to close the paediatric ward at Grantham hospital, pending consultation on the future of all the units, including paediatrics, gynaecology, obstetrics and accident and emergency. The future of Grantham as a general hospital is at stake.

Mr. Dobson: The first requirement is that the interests of the people presently served by Grantham hospital should continue to be served, and that they have a modern and reliable health service to deliver the health care that they want. However, that has to be considered in the light of the other obligations on the rest of the health service in Lincolnshire; as I understand it, that is the proposition that will eventually come to me. I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming one of the changes that Labour is making in the membership of health authorities and

trusts. In view of some ignorant suggestions, I am always glad to welcome congratulations from the Opposition on the improvement in personnel that we are making.

Mr. Jim Marshall: I also thank my right hon. Friend for the additional financial resources that will come to Leicestershire this year and next. Will my right hon. Friend guarantee that, in the review of the formulae for distributing the funds nationally, he will ensure that underfunded areas such as Leicestershire receive their due reward in coming years?

Mr. Dobson: I can make two clear points. First, the allocation that we have recently announced better reflects clinical need and deprivation than did the formulae used by the previous Government. Secondly, and contrary to much scaremongering by Opposition Members, the new formulae involve an element of rurality, so that areas with sparser populations do not suffer. I realise that that does not apply to the city of Leicester, but I expect that Leicester will benefit from the changes that I have mentioned.

Solihull Hospital

3. **Mr. John M. Taylor:** If he will pay an official visit to Solihull hospital to discuss local health provision. [13810]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): I have no plans to visit Solihull hospital, but I will conduct an official visit to Birmingham Heartlands and Solihull NHS Trust in the near future. I am looking forward to it enormously.

Mr. Taylor: The Minister will be welcome when he comes to Solihull. Contrary to what the Secretary of State had to say, the previous Government gave my constituency a magnificent new state-of-the-art hospital. The Minister of State has recently vouchsafed to me in a written answer the range of services provided by that hospital. I hope that, when the Minister visits Solihull, he will be able to say that that range of services will be sustained for the benefit of my constituents and, perhaps, that other services will be added.

Mr. Boateng: The NHS in Solihull is certainly safe in our hands: I am not so sure that it was safe in the hands of the previous Government.

National Health Service (Funding)

4. **Caroline Flint:** What action he is taking to cut waste in the national health service. [13811]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): On 22 May, we announced a programme of measures to reduce management costs by £100 million this year. Our efficiency task force has identified savings of £40 million. As part of our plans to replace the internal market, we are looking at the scope for further savings from bureaucracy.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. In Doncaster alone last year, 60,000 people did not turn up for their appointments, thus leaving empty seats in waiting rooms in hospitals. I am sure that that situation is reflected across the country. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we appreciate the resources of the NHS, because the money wasted by people not turning up could fund important projects, such as the breast cancer clinic and Jasmine centre in Doncaster.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that with the right that patients have to access to NHS services comes the responsibility to use those services wisely. The Government will be seeking to learn the lessons from best practice, particularly in areas like "did not attends". The efficiency task force will be looking specifically at this area, and we intend to bear down on bureaucracy and waste and to invest more in front-line patient services.

Mr. Soames: Will the Minister look with care at the programme of savings instituted in the Ministry of Defence by the former Chief Secretary, which was extremely successful in looking at the non-core business and work of the MoD and seeing whether that work could be contracted out or done better by other people? The considerable savings from "Front Line First" were ploughed back into the front line. Will he look at such a programme and not dismiss it out of hand, as there is real scope for substantial savings?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman knows, what counts for this Government is what works. The efficiency task force will look to ensure that, in future, we will pool together where possible the functions currently provided by NHS trusts. If it is possible to bear down on administration functions and to cut waste, we will do so. I am sure that all hon. Members will back the Government's manifesto commitment to ensure that resources go to front-line patient services.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: Does my hon. Friend share my concern at recent press reports of waste within the national blood transfusion service, and particularly the waste of blood products donated freely for use by NHS patients?

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend is aware, a review is taking place of the successes—and some of the failures—of the blood transfusion service. That review will report shortly.

Mr. Simon Hughes: In the Government's campaign against waste in the health service—which we fully support—will they make sure that NHS trusts and civil servants get the message that projects which are wasteful of taxpayers' money and time and which duplicate perfectly good existing resources will not be approved? When Ministers come to their conclusions about the London review, will they make sure that approval is not given to the spending of between £100 million and £200 million of taxpayers' charitable money on building a new hospital across the river on the St. Thomas's site when £200 million has been spent on building a new hospital on the Guy's site, and when it is proposed that 18 floors of the Guy's hospital buildings will be left empty?

Mr. Milburn: I would not want to prejudge the outcome of the Turnberg review of London's health

services, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that all projects—particularly capital projects—will be judged to ensure that they provide maximum value for money for patients and the taxpayer.

Child Care

5. **Ms Rosie Winterton:** If he will make a statement about the future regulation of children's day care services and supervised activities under the Children Act 1989. [13813]

Mr. Boateng: The Under-Secretaries of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Yardley (Ms Morris) and for Newport, East (Mr. Howarth), and I will be consulting, early in the new year, on our plans to develop an integrated regulation and inspection system that will promote day care and early-years education for young children, provide a quality assurance framework in which parents can have confidence and reduce bureaucracy for providers. That was another commitment in our general election manifesto which we are carrying out.

Ms Winterton: Is my hon. Friend aware of a case in my constituency where a two-year-old child, Ben Chorlton, walked out of a creche provided by a private gym into a nearby bus station? The creche was not registered because it operated for less than two hours per day. Does he believe that it is acceptable for a creche to operate for one hour and 55 minutes per day solely to avoid registration and inspection? Will he meet me to discuss the implications of the case?

Mr. Boateng: No, it is thoroughly unacceptable. The two-hour time limit for registration was introduced to ensure that one-off or less formal, unremunerated short-term care arrangements were not unnecessarily burdened by unworkable regulations.

It was never intended that proper regulation and supervision should be undermined by attempts such as my hon. Friend has described to remove the basis on which they are carried out. I look forward to meeting her to do all that we can to support Doncaster social services in ensuring that the facility puts itself in order.

NHS Pay

6. **Mr. Whittingdale:** If he will make a statement on the study which he has commissioned on pay rates in the NHS. [13814]

Mr. Dobson: I have ordered a survey of earnings in the national health service, to make available to the Government information that any employer would want to have. The previous Government stopped collecting that information, presumably on the basis of the motto, "Ignorance is strength".

Mr. Whittingdale: In conducting his survey, does the Secretary of State intend to take account of the effect of introducing a minimum wage, which is bound to cost the NHS tens of millions of pounds? Can he guarantee that the NHS budget will be increased to cover that cost and that it will not be met at the expense of patient care?

Mr. Dobson: It is precisely so that we can advise the Treasury and the rest of the Government on the possible impact on the national health service of a national minimum wage that we are collecting the information. It was the hon. Gentleman's own stupid, ignorant Government—for want of a better expression—who, for their own benighted reasons, stopped collecting the information; yet Tory Ministers from the Department of Health came to the Dispatch Box and announced figures of the impact on the national health service of a national minimum wage. As they did not know how many people were earning £2.50, £3, £3.50, £4 or whatever an hour in the national health service, that was pure speculation, like all the rest of the Tory attacks on a national minimum wage.

Mr. Hinchliffe: On NHS pay rates, may I take my right hon. Friend back to the answer that he gave a few moments ago to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall) about the formula for allocating resources to individual health authorities? What consideration has he given to removing the market forces factor from the current formula, which assumes that NHS wages are low in generally low-waged areas, such as my constituency, and badly penalises those areas?

Mr. Dobson: We have changed the arrangements for this year and we are considering next year's. To the people who graced—if that is the word—the Treasury Benches for the previous 18 years, all I can say is that I am astonished that they are not ashamed to acknowledge, let alone claim, to the House that a substantial number of the 1 million hard-working people in the national health service are likely to be paid less than what would be a reasonable national minimum wage. They are saying that our national health service depends on paying poverty wages, when they know that poverty makes people ill.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Unison recommendation of £4.42 an hour as the national minimum wage would be more than what is earned by 96.4 per cent. of ancillary workers in the health service; by 5 per cent. of clerical and administrative workers; and by 8 per cent. of professional and technical workers? Does he acknowledge that, if those workers were not paid properly, the health service would suffer?

Mr. Dobson: Exactly. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Low Pay Commission is currently considering what the national minimum wage should be. As he points out to Conservative Members, who sit on the same side of the House as him but with whom he is generally not associated, I am glad to say, a substantial number of badly paid people in the national health service nevertheless provide services that are vital if the highly paid professionals are to be able to do their jobs properly. Once again, it is shameful that Tories should be asking me what the impact on the national health service of a national minimum wage is likely to be, when they are apparently proud of paying poverty wages to people who provide treatment and care for the sick and injured.

Mr. Skinner: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is staggering to hear the Tories attacking low-paid workers when a previous Tory Secretary of State for Health, who later became Chancellor of the Exchequer, has now got four extra moonlighting jobs, picking up something approaching £500,000 a year? There are gangs

of them on the Tory Benches, all lining their pockets with outside interests, and they have got the cheek to attack low-paid workers in the national health service. Gang of hypocrites!

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend points out, yet again, the Tories are for the few rather than the many, and we are proud to be for the many rather than the few.

NHS Waiting Lists

7. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** What has been the trend in NHS waiting lists since May 1997; and what targets he is setting for the next 12 months. [13815]

Mr. Dobson: In May 1997, the new Government inherited from the Tory Government the longest hospital waiting lists in the history of the national health service after 18 years of Tory rule. Inevitably, those waiting lists have continued to grow. *[Interruption.]* I am astonished that Tory Members are surprised. We inherited the longest hospital waiting lists in history, and they were rising faster than ever before in the history of the NHS. The extra £300 million that we have made available to the NHS this winter should help restrain the rate of growth but reducing waiting lists will take time. We will shortly announce a package of measures designed to deliver our clear manifesto commitment that waiting lists will be reduced before the end of this Parliament.

Mr. Bruce: I notice that the Secretary of State, who had a very easy question from me, did not give us the target for the next 12 months. He keeps prevaricating. May I give him an easier question? Dorset never had a problem with waiting lists until this Government came to power. He says that the extra money was given to areas where sparsity was a factor. Dorset must be one of the sparsest counties, so why have we had one of the smallest amounts of money? Why is no attempt being made to keep what the Government said was a top-priority promise?

Mr. Dobson: I really do not think that I can be reasonably expected to plead guilty to the immediate devastation of South Dorset; nor am I responsible for the hon. Gentleman's majority of 77. Given the sparsity factor, his area will next year get an increase of 4.14 per cent. on its spending this year—an extra £13 million. If he did not have barefaced cheek, he would get up and thank me for it.

Mr. Gunnell: May I say to my right hon. Friend that the extra money to stop waiting lists rising enormously this winter is welcome? What flexibility will there be in the spending of that money between the health service and social services? Dealing with the problem means tackling bed blocking and putting money into social services. How will that flexibility be applied locally? Who will be involved in the decision making?

Mr. Dobson: Since we took over, we have emphasised at every stage that the problems faced by the national health and the social services this winter can be dealt with only if they are working together. I have written twice to health service bosses in each area and to local authority bosses. The chief inspector of social services and the chief executive of the NHS have made joint visits to all the areas, to ensure that they are working together. I have made it plain that regional offices should allocate funds only to those areas in which it is clear that social and national health services are working together. Only when they work together will they be able to succeed.

Mr. Nicholls: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that waiting lists in Cornwall will rise dramatically if the health authority there carries out its proposal to close four community hospitals. Is he aware that the people of Cornwall regard the so-called public consultation as a complete sham, bearing in mind that the chief executive has said that he would close those four hospitals even if he had unlimited resources? Given that the Secretary of State, to his credit, has on a number of occasions paid due credit to the work done by community and cottage hospitals, will he avoid passing judgment on what the eventual plans may be, but use his residuary powers to quash the present public consultation process and introduce a new one in which the public could have confidence? He acted with commendable speed last week to deal with a crisis in Exeter. Will he act today and intervene to safeguard the position of the people of Cornwall?

Mr. Dobson: I do not think that that would be sensible. I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Opposition Front Bench and thank him for his kind remarks about our response to the breast cancer screening crisis in Devon and Exeter. However, it would probably not serve the people of Cornwall to blow the whistle on the existing consultation process and start all over again—that would simply prolong the uncertainty. I give him and the people of Cornwall the assurance that when the proposals come before me, as they certainly will because the community health councils are opposed to them, I shall scrutinise them very carefully indeed.

Having been belaboured by various people on television, the radio and in newspapers in Cornwall about what was then allegedly the fact that the cottage hospital closures necessarily followed on from a shortage of funds in Cornwall, I was somewhat taken aback to hear the paid public official, the chief executive, announce that he would close them if he had all the money that God sends.

Smoking

8. **Mr. Jim Cunningham:** If he will make a statement about levels of smoking among young people in England. [13816]

The Minister for Public Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): In 1996, 13 per cent. of all secondary school children in England were regular smokers, but by the age of 15, 33 per cent. of girls and 28 per cent. of boys were smokers.

Mr. Cunningham: Can my hon. Friend ensure that the principal aims of the Government's policy to cut the numbers of young people and teenagers smoking will be maintained?

Ms Jowell: It is a measure of the previous Government's failure that one in three 15-year-old girls are hooked on cigarettes before leaving school. That is why our first priority is to cut smoking among children.

Mr. Maples: May I remind the hon. Lady, that in a departmental press release on 14 July, she said:

"Certainly we want to see an end to tobacco advertising in the form of sports sponsorship"?

In her article in *The Daily Telegraph* today, she says:

"The decision to propose an exemption for Formula One is one that has my total support."

On which occasion was she telling us what she really thought?

Ms Jowell: Policies to stop children smoking that work have my total support. A ban on advertising will stop children smoking. Negotiating a global ban on advertising with formula one will stop children smoking. That is our overriding priority.

Mr. Stevenson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the task facing the Government now is to get on with a ban on advertising smoking, where that can be practically and quickly achieved? Would not such a measure of the Government's determination be in stark contrast to the cowardly attitude of the Conservative party, which steadfastly refused to face up to that important issue?

Ms Jowell: We intend to make progress with a comprehensive range of measures to stop children smoking and to support the seven out of every 10 smokers who want to give up. The mark of success for our Government will be that we make real progress in reducing the needless death and suffering caused by smoking—121,000 people are dying every year and we are determined to stop that.

Sir Raymond Whitney: Does the Minister accept that, given that thousands of young people are interested in motor sports, there is widespread concern about the impact of the Government's recent decision on advertising in motor sports? Does she also agree that, uniquely, be it rightly or wrongly, the conjunction between the allegations of political contributions and the Government's U-turn causes serious concern throughout the country?

Ms Jowell: This Government, unlike the last Government, will ban tobacco advertising. This Government, unlike the last Government, will reduce the rate at which people die from cigarette smoking. The only legacy of the last Government was the fact that health Ministers who stood up and tried to do something about smoking were moved very quickly.

"The Health of the Nation"

9. **Mr. Pike:** What changes he proposes to make to the "Health of the Nation" strategy. [13817]

Ms Jowell: We shall publish our Green Paper on "Our Healthier Nation" this winter and we shall take careful note of all the responses we receive to the consultation that follows. We shall use them to inform the new health strategy which we plan to publish in summer 1998.

Mr. Pike: Is it not important that, in that exercise, the Government have recognised that health inequalities exist in this country? Doctors and nurses throughout the country welcome the fact that we not only recognise but are prepared to tackle those health inequalities. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Department of Health has now removed the ban on its civil servants talking about health inequalities, which will mean that we shall be able to deal with them in a positive way?

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend is correct to say that we now have the basis for a public health policy that will work, because we are prepared to confront the fact that, the poorer people are, the worse their health is likely to be. We intend to take action to tackle that. In my hon. Friend's constituency, that action would include reducing the levels of coronary heart disease and lung cancer, where Burnley is among the worst 10 per cent. in the country; and reducing the number of girls under 16 who get pregnant, where Burnley is still well above the national average.

Mr. Maples: Given that one of the "Health of the Nation" targets was a reduction in teenage smoking, and given that the Minister refused to tell us what she really thought about that issue in answer to my previous question, perhaps she will try to answer this one. Last week, when she was in some difficulty on the issue, she said that she had acted on the advice of the Secretary of State. He was conspicuous by his silence. Does it ever occur to her that perhaps he set her up?

Ms Jowell: I think that the House will judge that with the contempt that it deserves. The hon. Gentleman's behaviour throughout this matter has been below the standards that people in this country think they deserve. The Conservatives have used nasty smear and innuendo as a way of masking the complete failure of their policies to stop children smoking.

Healthy Living Centres

10. **Dr. Palmer:** What action he is taking to develop healthy living centres. [13818]

Ms Jowell: Work is under way to ensure that healthy living centres, which will be funded from national lottery money, contribute to the success of the Government's health strategy and complement existing provision. They will provide a focus for local, community action to improve health, which is one of the pillars of the Government's health strategy.

Dr. Palmer: Is not the priority that the Government are giving to health spending for lottery money not vastly preferable to the priority of the previous Government, who were even willing to give one of their own Members of Parliament lottery money for his grandfather's diaries?

Ms Jowell: We attach very high priority to tackling inequality in health, and the spending of that lottery money to develop healthy living centres is one way in which we intend to do so.

Mrs. Roe: Can the Minister confirm that healthy living centres will not offer services currently provided by the NHS from the taxpayers' money?

Ms Jowell: As the hon. Lady is aware, the principle that determines the spending of lottery money is what is

called additionality. No, the healthy living centres will not replace the services of the national health service, but will be additional to them, and will be a very important way of our ensuring that people have access to exercise and to advice about health. The centres will help us to promote better health and reduce avoidable illness.

Dr. Brand: Does the Minister agree that the extraordinary decision to exempt formula one racing advertising will undermine the efforts made by those healthy living centres?

Mr. Bermingham *rose—*

Dr. Brand: Does not the Minister now need to advise the Prime Minister that that extraordinary decision will undermine the campaign to achieve the aim, which we are all trying to achieve, of deglamorising smoking among young people?

Ms Jowell: Since the object of exempting formula one is to ensure that there is less tobacco advertising, not more, it is part of a policy that is entirely consistent with our development of healthy living centres as part of our public health strategy.

Prescription Charges

11. **Mr. Peter Bottomley:** What is his policy in respect of future prescription charges for pensioners. [13819]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced on 11 June that prescription charges were to be one element of the Department of Health's comprehensive spending review. We aim to complete the review by next spring.

Mr. Bottomley: Will the hon. Gentleman pass on to his right hon. Friend the message that I am sorry that the Secretary of State was not chosen to answer this question, as, the day after the Treasury Minister made that comment, the right hon. Gentleman was quoted, presumably accurately, as saying that prescription charges for the elderly are "politically unacceptable" and will be brought in only over his "dead body"?

As, a few days later, on 18 June, the Prime Minister used three columns of *Hansard*, columns 303-05, to say that prescription charges were being considered, what exactly is the policy of the Department of Health, and how does it square with what is in the Labour manifesto?

Mr. Milburn: The policy of the Health Department is that we are conducting a review, and the review will report in due course. I would take the hon. Gentleman's concerns more seriously and they would be more convincing if the Conservatives, when they were in power, had not increased prescription charges fourfold in real terms. The outcome of the comprehensive spending review will be judged by one yardstick: the Government's commitment to the historic principle of the NHS that services should be available according to need and need alone.

Mr. Llew Smith: As the Minister is aware, this week, in my constituency and throughout the land, we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Nye Bevan. What does the Minister feel Nye's attitude would have been after 18 years not just of Tory government but of prescription charge increases?

Mr. Milburn: Only one party in the House is addicted to charges in the national health service. It is the party that introduced prescription charges, dental check charges and eye test charges into the national health service: the Conservative party.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: While the prospect of any future charges for prescriptions is immensely important to pensioners and to all elderly people in this country, has the Minister given any thought to another related matter: the ability of people to fund their retirement, and particularly their need for residential or nursing care? The previous Government advanced proposals in that area; are the new Government considering the matter as part of the review?

Mr. Milburn: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes this issue, and health issues in general, very seriously. I assure him that, before too long, we shall announce details of a royal commission that will examine those issues properly. We shall ensure that, in future, older people receive the sort of treatment and services that they deserve.

Scottish Devolution

13. **Mr. Dalyell:** What consultation he has had with the Scottish Office since the referendum on the transfer of responsibilities which are currently his to the Scottish Parliament. [13821]

Mr. Dobson: Our proposals for devolution are set out in the White Paper "Scotland's Parliament". There are no plans to transfer any of my responsibilities to the Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Dalyell: May I assume that fertility treatment and abortion will remain reserved powers?

Mr. Dobson: That is correct.

NHS Staff (Attacks)

14. **Mrs. Ellman:** What guidance has been issued by his Department to protect NHS staff from attacks at work. [13822]

Mr. Dobson: As my hon. Friend knows, I think it is disgraceful that our society has descended so low that people who work in accident and emergency departments or who go out with ambulances or are district nurses or GPs cannot perform their duties without fear of assault and abuse. Since coming to my present office, I have made it a major priority that national service managers must do whatever they can to reduce the impact of violent assaults on national health service staff.

We issued a circular on the effective management of security in accident and emergency departments—which was prepared in part by the previous Government—and, since then, we have issued further health and safety guidance on minimising the risk of violence to staff. I return to my initial point: it is, and must remain, a major target of national health service management to ensure that staff are not assaulted and abused. It is the duty of the whole criminal justice system to make sure that anyone who assaults a national health service staff member is punished severely.

Mrs. Ellman: I thank the Secretary of State for taking such decisive action in an important area that the previous Government neglected so badly. Can my right hon. Friend inform the House how we might improve the patients charter so that we can move from the empty rhetoric of the charter introduced by the Conservative Government and towards a charter with real rights and responsibilities for both patients and staff?

Mr. Dobson: National health service staff at all levels and in all disciplines tell me that certain aspects of the patients charter have led to an increase in the number of assaults on and abuses of staff, particularly in accident and emergency departments. That is one reason why we intend to change the patients charter and make it an NHS charter in which patients have responsibilities as well as rights.

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: The right hon. Gentleman may be aware that many NHS non-executives fear that they are being attacked by the Secretary of State. There is a large number of outstanding appointments. The system was essentially endorsed after exhaustive examination by Lord Nolan. If the right hon. Gentleman discusses the matter with his noble Friends Baronesses Dean, Jay and Hayman—and many others in this place who served on trusts—he will discover that they are very worried that he will exceed the actions of one of his predecessors who vindictively dismissed 150 appointees when he came to power. Will the right hon. Gentleman state that he has no intention of attacking those NHS non-executives who have done so much for the health service?

Mr. Dobson: I do not propose to demean the House by answering that stupid question about the former Secretary of State's Tory friends losing their places on national health service trusts, when my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) was referring to the physical assault and abuse of nurses, doctors and ambulance staff. If the right hon. Lady thinks that there are parallels between the two cases, no wonder she made such a mess of this job.

Tobacco Advertising

15. **Mr. Lock:** What action the Government are taking to reduce tobacco advertising. [13823]

Ms Jowell: The Government are fully committed to banning tobacco advertising and are currently taking an active part in discussions with European Union member states on the draft directive on tobacco advertising.

Mr. Lock: I thank my hon. Friend for that statement. Does she accept that about one in six of my constituents who die, die as a result of tobacco-related illnesses, and that the vast majority of them began smoking before they reached the age of 20? Does she further accept that the tobacco companies know that, and target their billboard and magazine advertising at young people? Will she join me in condemning the Conservatives, who for 18 years knew the statistics and failed to take any effective action to protect our young people?

Ms Jowell: As my hon. Friend makes clear, the record of the previous Government is shameful. As a result of their negligence, there has been an increase in the rate at which young people smoke. That is why we are committed to implementing a wide range of measures, which will be set out in our White Paper next year and which are designed particularly to tackle the increasing problem of young people taking up smoking. Most people start smoking before they are 20. That is why it is important to focus on efforts to stop young people taking up smoking in the first place.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Can the Minister come up with even one formula to explain away the Government's U-turn on their manifesto commitment to ban tobacco advertising?

Ms Jowell: There is no U-turn on any manifesto commitment: we will ban tobacco advertising, because we are determined to reduce the rate at which people die through smoking.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned in earlier answers the increase in smoking among young people that occurred under the previous Government. Has she any particular plans to tackle the increase in smoking among young women, as smoking has increased more quickly among them than among young men? Can she give us a preview of the actions she plans to take to target that group, who are extremely vulnerable and at risk of dying in future from their smoking now?

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is no single measure that will enable us to be successful in reducing the rate at which people die through smoking. The case of young women is a good example. We will have to work with women's magazines and women's organisations to tackle the glamorising of smoking, which persuades so many women, young and older, to take up smoking. For many poor women, the reason they smoke is that their lives feel hopeless. That is why a range of other Government policies—such as getting young lone mothers back to work and raising educational standards—will all help in our battle to reduce smoking.

Cosmetic Surgery

16. **Ann Clwyd:** If he will make a statement on the regulation of cosmetic surgery. [13824]

Mr. Milburn: Statutory control of clinics offering cosmetic surgery in the private sector is provided through a system of registration and inspection delegated to health authorities under the Registered Homes Act 1984.

Ann Clwyd: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. I know that the Government have already set up

a review into silicone implants. Will he look again at regulations for private cosmetic clinics? I gave the previous Government a great deal of evidence about hundreds of women who have been scarred and injured as a result of treatment by cowboy operators in some private cosmetic clinics. Is my hon. Friend aware that a previous president of the Royal College of Surgeons said that animals are better protected in Britain than are people? Will he re-examine the matter?

Mr. Milburn: I commend my hon. Friend's work on behalf of patients who have suffered through cosmetic surgery in the private sector. All patients, regardless of whether they receive their treatment and operations in the private sector or the national health service, should expect the highest possible standards of medical care. My hon. Friend will be aware that there are certain safeguards for patients within the current regulatory framework. Ministers are considering how better to safeguard patients' interests when they use private sector medical treatment.

National Blood Transfusion Service

18. **Dr. Harris:** If he will publish performance indicators for all regions of the national blood transfusion service. [13827]

Mr. Dobson: A range of performance indicators for the national blood service's operations are being developed. Some of them should be published later this month. I want to ensure that any indicators of performance make sense and are acceptable to the clinicians who receive the services from the national blood transfusion service. I am not wildly impressed by the senior management of that outfit.

Dr. Harris: Given the recently announced £3.5 million cost of redundancies in the national blood transfusion service since 1 April 1995 and that the interim Cash report on the move of services from Liverpool to Manchester stated that the national blood authority's plans were not proven and that it was too late to reconsider them, may I ask why the Secretary of State announced the setting up of the review only in August, given that it was an issue that the Labour party had campaigned on hard and effectively while in opposition and given also that the Labour Government prided themselves on hitting the ground reviewing in May?

Mr. Dobson: On getting into office, I immediately asked for reports on the state of the proposals for the transfer from Liverpool to Manchester of bulk processing of blood. Had I been in a position to take the initial decision, I would never have agreed to the transfer. I asked Professor Cash, the president of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and the former head of the Scottish blood transfusion service, to advise me. His advice was, reluctantly, that the Liverpool service was so run down that, in the interests of the safety and security of blood supplies, it was, sadly, necessary to go ahead with the transfer.

I expect Professor Cash to report to me shortly on the future of blood services in the north-west as a whole. On the basis of the reports which he has submitted to me, I expect that his views will have an impact on the provision of blood services throughout the country. That is one of the reasons why I am not very happy with the way in which the blood service has been run over the past few years.

Mr. Bermingham: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the mistake having been made—we all know that it was made in the transfer—steps should now be taken to review the north-west and the supply within it so that there might be adequate services in that area? Will he give me an undertaking that such a review will take place? I know that this appalling mistake is not my right hon. Friend's but his predecessor's, but will steps be taken to rectify it in due course?

Mr. Dobson: I have asked Professor Cash to produce a report that contains proposals on how best to secure the interests of the people of Merseyside and the needs of clinicians working in the area who are trying to provide top-quality treatment and care, and then to put in place machinery to make that possible.

I return to the basic point: that the blood service must be adequate and safe for the people of Merseyside and for people in every other part of the country. People throughout the United Kingdom should have sufficient confidence in the service to ensure that they are willing to continue as blood donors. I urge people to do so, because blood is always desperately needed and good use is made of it.

General Practitioner Fundholding

20. **Ms Drown:** How much money his Department saved by not approving the eighth wave of applications for GP fundholding status. [13829]

Mr. Milburn: The deferment of the eighth wave of the general practitioner fundholding scheme led to £20 million from the inherited budget for general practitioner fundholders' management costs being immediately redeployed into patient care.

An additional £9 million has subsequently been released from further management efficiency savings nationally in the fundholding scheme.

Ms Drown: In the light of that answer, will my hon. Friend review the potential administrative savings that could be made from previous waves of GP fundholding, so that money could be redirected into basic NHS services, such as dentistry, in my constituency? Not only are no new adults in my constituency being accepted on NHS dentist lists, but a recent poll showed that one in three dentists were not accepting new children on NHS lists.

Mr. Milburn: I am aware of the concerns in the Swindon area about the availability of dental services. I shall see my right hon. Friend before long to discuss these. I can give my hon. Friend an assurance that the Government will do everything that we can to bear down on unnecessary bureaucracy costs wherever they arise in the national health service to ensure that there is adequate investment in front-line patient care.

Points of Order

3.30 pm

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will be aware that many millions of people this morning marked the Armistice day two-minute silence, to commemorate those who have fallen in trying to defeat some of the worst tyrannies that the world has ever seen. They died it to defeat tyranny and uphold democracy. The House is the fount of democracy.

Although I am aware that many Committees and many staff of the House marked the two-minute silence, it seems wholly appropriate that there should be a more official way of marking it in future. Will it be possible for hon. Members, on a purely voluntary basis, to come to the Chamber at 11 o'clock on the 11th hour of the 11th day to mark the silence? If that is not considered appropriate, perhaps there should be a two-minute silence in our normal 2.30 prayers in the House.

If you consider that appropriate, Madam Speaker, I ask you to refer it to the appropriate Committee.

Madam Speaker: I should be glad to give consideration to the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. I do not know whether he was in the House last Thursday when we had an exchange on this matter. I am pleased to tell hon. Members who are interested that all Committees that sat this morning observed the two-minute silence. As the hon. Gentleman will probably know, I sent suggestions to all the Departments of the House asking them to observe the silence, and I know that very many of them did. I looked through my kitchen window when I was observing the two-minute silence and was pleased to see that traffic on Westminster bridge came to a standstill, as did the pedestrians. The House has done an honour to the dead of two world wars, but I will be glad to look at suggestions for next year.

Mr. Gerald Bermingham (St. Helens, South): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise for trying to raise a point of order during Question Time. I should have known better.

We have a new Opposition, who are clearly young in their task of learning. Perhaps it could be pointed out to them that questions supplementary to those on the Order Paper are supposed to be relevant to the subject of the main question. We had example after example today where that did not happen. I noticed with considerable interest—this may be something that my own party will take on board—that even Liberal Democrats tried to join in that badly behaved, orchestrated insult to a very honourable Member of the House.

Madam Speaker: That is not a very complimentary comment to me, if I may say so, Mr. Bermingham. I watch the Order Paper very carefully, and I find that many hon. Members on both sides of the House do not follow substantive questions. I had to call to order Members on the Government side yesterday for not following the question. This is an opportunity for me to remind all hon. Members that the substantive question has to be followed in the supplementary. Thank you for raising that.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Some months ago, I tried to find out from the Registrar of Members' Interests—I have written to the people concerned, as you would wish—whether the use of a blind trust for financing the Leader of the Opposition's office would be acceptable. It was made very clear to me that that would not be acceptable under the existing rules. Therefore, I wrote to the Prime Minister's office, pointing out to him that Sir Trevor Chinn, Sir Emanuel Kay, Sir Alex Bernstein and Bob Gaveron were all named, known and admitted contributors to the Prime Minister's blind trust. This morning, it was suggested that Mr. Max Mosley and Mr. Bernie Ecclestone were also contributors to the blind trust.

My point of order is that I have written to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, pointing out that all that information is available. I have had a letter from the Prime Minister's office saying that it knows about the information and that it had passed to the political honours scrutiny committee the names of those who had given money to the blind trust. Yet all that information—

Madam Speaker: Order. What is the point of order for me?

Mr. Bruce: The point of order concerns how we can get the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges to investigate what is clearly a breach of our rules. It brings the House into disrepute, because it is alleged that money is changing hands to gain the Prime Minister's influence.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Whatever you do in response to the request from the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), do not send the matter to the committee that I wanted to set up when the Tory party took £440,000 from that crook Asil Nadir. You know, Madam Speaker, that I raised that issue in the House 20 times. I wanted committees; I wanted investigations; I wanted the Tory Government to send the money back to all the shareholders in Mr. Nadir's company—but what happened? The Tories kept the money and used it in the general election campaign. The British people said, "That money stinks and we are going to kick the Tories out." My party sent the money back.

Madam Speaker: Order. These are not points of order. I recognise them only too well as political point scoring, and I will have no more of them. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) knows that we have procedures to deal with the matter he raised. He should raise it with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and not on the Floor of the House.

Mr. Ian Bruce: But Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Order. I have had enough.

Regulation of Wet Bikes

3.36 pm

Mr. Gareth Thomas: I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate the use of wet bikes; and for connected purposes.

I shall begin by defining the term "wet bikes", which has caused some confusion, and then refer to the nature and scale of the problem caused by these machines and the mischief that the Bill is intended to address. I shall also outline how my Bill will achieve its objectives.

I shall relieve the suspense of many hon. Members and explain that the term wet bikes is interchangeable with jet skis and personal water craft. Jet skis are a proprietary name for a well-known brand of wet bike. Suffice it to say that these craft—we all know what they are because they are an increasingly visible and, I am afraid, audible feature of our coasts—are equipped with very powerful petrol-driven engines. They suck in water and blow it out in the form of a jet at the rear; hence the name jet skis. They are capable of generating up to 135 brake horsepower and great acceleration up to 65 mph. They also generate a great deal of noise.

A particular feature of wet bikes, of which there are about 15,000 in this country, is the ease with which they can be used, which means that many users do not always acquire a sense of the danger inherent in the machines. Kawasaki's top-selling bike costs £7,500, and there is a significant and increasing market in used machines.

It is a surprising fact that, at present, there is no age restriction for the use of the machines. There is nothing to stop a five-year-old using one; there is no national requirement for insurance; there is no national proficiency test; and there is no system of national registration, either of the machines or of their users. In short, there is a glaring absence of consistent and rational regulation, and the danger posed by these machines calls for such regulation.

Wet bikes are a potential danger to all other water users—bathers, yachtsmen, water skiers, surfers, canoeists and children at play—in both coastal and inland waters. The bikes are also a danger to their riders.

Accidents have occurred across the country. This summer, there were two tragic fatal accidents. On the weekend of 10 August, Fay Grundy, aged 17, was fatally injured at Queensford lake, Oxfordshire. She was riding as the pillion passenger on a wet bike that strayed into the path of a boat pulling a water skier. Two weeks later—off the north Wales coast, in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley)—a 25-year-old nurse from Rochdale died after her Kawasaki wet bike was involved in a head-on collision with another bike.

Wet bikes are very noisy, and they can ruin people's enjoyment of our coastline and inland waters. In the wrong hands, they pose a threat also to the balanced environment of our estuaries and to the feeding grounds of rare birds.

Furthermore, a significant delinquent element uses the bikes. A police constable from the Essex police force marine unit was recently quoted as saying:

"Sometimes there are 50 or 60 in one area, like yobs teeming round on motor bikes. They buzz swimmers, buzz boats and zip in and out of moorings. It is a catastrophe looking for somewhere to happen."

There is an increasing body of opinion among local authorities, police forces and those involved in the activity that the public interest now demands that there should be national regulation of wet bikes. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, is in the Chamber, and I am very grateful to her for coming to hear my speech. Although I know that her Department is working on solutions, it is time to grasp the nettle and to regulate.

In the United Kingdom—as a reflection of our long nautical history—there is a tradition of minimal regulation of private pleasure craft. Nevertheless, under the various public health Acts, harbourmasters and local authorities can introduce byelaws to prevent danger, obstruction and annoyance of bathers. Moreover, the approach of the Government, and of their predecessor, has been to be sceptical of national regulation; Governments generally have tended to rely on byelaws. There are, however, problems with byelaws.

As those who have been involved in local government well know, the process of enacting byelaws is lengthy, complicated and expensive. Byelaws are difficult to enforce and, significantly, they will do nothing to deal with the real problem of non-registration, making it very difficult to ascertain the identity of culprits or transgressors when they misbehave on bikes.

The byelaw system has produced an inconsistent pattern of regulation in an area where consistent statutory standards are essential. Despite the lightness of the legislative approach in this sphere, I propose that a special case should be made for wet bikes—because of their speed, the ease with which they can be used and the injury and damage that they can cause.

I propose, first, establishing a national registration system and requiring that every machine prominently displays its registration number, thereby dealing with the problem of locating the delinquent element.

Secondly, there should be a compulsory system of third-party insurance. Thirdly, there should be a compulsory national training scheme and a licence system for users, which I hope would be self-financing. Fourthly, there needs to be a minimum age requirement of 16. Fifthly, there should be a ban on the use of wet bikes on environmentally sensitive areas of our coast and on beaches traditionally used for bathing, as well as on rivers, reservoirs and lakes within our national parks that are subject to the right of navigation.

I commend the Bill to the House. It would make a modest but much-needed change to the law and would be manifestly in the public interest.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Gareth Thomas, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. Martin Caton, Dr. Peter Brand, Mr. Gordon Marsden, Mr. Gwyn Prosser, Mr. Ronnie Fearn, Mrs. Betty Williams, Mr. Chris Ruane, Mr. John Gummer, Mr. David Hanson and Mr. Andrew Mackinlay.

REGULATION OF WET BIKES

Mr. Gareth Thomas accordingly presented a Bill to regulate the use of wet bikes; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 February, and to be printed [Bill 79].

Orders of the Day

Bank of England Bill

[*Relevant documents: First Report from the Treasury Committee on accountability of the Bank of England (HC 282) and the minutes of evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on Wednesday 5th November (HC 309).*]

Order for Second Reading read.

Mr. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I should be grateful for some clarification. When, in May, the Chancellor made the statement that gave rise to today's debate, the proposal was billed as one of the most important economic measures since the war. As the measure purports to occasion the abdication of such a major responsibility from the Treasury to the Bank of England, is it in order for the debate to be led not by the Chancellor himself but by the Chief Secretary? Is it not customary for holders of high office at least to be in at their own abdication, even if Opposition Members believe that it is a case of premature abdication?

Madam Speaker: It is not a matter for me which Minister handles the legislation. There is collective responsibility.

3.46 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Alistair Darling): I am not sure who the hon. Gentleman is, but when I find out I might perhaps deal with the matter.

I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill is a further step in our determination to modernise the British economy and to equip this country for the new global economy of the future. First, it gives the Bank of England operational independence to set interest rates to meet the Government's inflation target. It will do so through the most open, accountable set of procedures of any central bank in the world.

The Bill implements the first stage in our promise to modernise and reform the supervision and regulation of the United Kingdom's financial services industry—it spells the end of self-regulation and sets up the new Financial Services Authority, which will enjoy the confidence of consumers and the industry alike. That will give London and the UK industry as a whole a huge competitive advantage.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Will my right hon. Friend explain how one can modernise the British economy by going back to arrangements that we last saw under Montagu Norman in the 1930s?

Mr. Darling: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I shall set out exactly how we do that and how the various parts of the Bill will modernise our procedures and institutions.

The Bill underpins our economic approach, which is to secure long-term stability and the promotion of high and stable levels of growth and employment. It enshrines our commitment to increased openness and accountability, which, in turn, will lead to the enhanced credibility in monetary policy that the world now demands.

Mr. Llew Smith (Blaenau Gwent) *rose—*

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I shall give way in a moment.

The Bill will provide the stable platform that business and the country need, and it will increase confidence in this country's commitment to low inflation in the future.

I have to give way to one hon. Member at a time, and I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) is first.

Mr. Llew Smith: As we have now passed responsibility for interest rates to the Bank of England, if the rate that the Monetary Policy Committee sets brings about stable prices but creates unemployment, what powers will the Government have? If we join a single currency and hand over even more powers to the European central bank, what powers will the Government have if unemployment rises?

Mr. Darling: There are two points there. First, we are not joining the single currency this afternoon. That is for another day. Secondly, my hon. Friend must accept that, in the long term, the only way to achieve high and sustainable levels of growth is to ensure price stability and low inflation. I know that some people believe that it is possible to have high inflation and high levels of employment, but I do not accept that.

Our proposals will give us the necessary long-term stability that has eluded us in the past to enable us to have the high levels of growth and the job opportunities that we all want. I think that the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) would like to intervene on the same point.

Mr. Wigley: I would indeed. The Bill gives overriding priority to maintaining price stability. Growth and employment are subject to that. That differs from the approach in the United States, where the Federal Reserve has inflation, growth and employment as targets of equal importance. The Government should not make employment subsidiary to the control of inflation, which appears to be the god on all occasions.

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman is mistaken. Clause 11 shows that the Government's objectives are high levels of growth and employment.

Mr. Wigley: The Bill says, "subject to that".

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman is reading it the wrong way round. The Bank's objective is to maintain price stability, but that is in support of the Government's objectives of growth and employment. It is not possible to have high and sustainable levels of growth, together with the levels of employment that we all want, without ensuring price stability in the first place. We have had to pay a high premium over the years because of the political

[Mr. Darling]

risks that the markets attach to this country. That is why we have suffered instability and boom and bust, undermining the platform that we all want.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I should like to make some progress and then I shall give way. I shall come back to that point. If the hon. Gentleman can contain himself, I should be happy to let him in shortly.

Low inflation is an essential precondition to achieving the Government's objectives of high and sustainable levels of economic growth and employment. Inflation hits business, discourages investment and, therefore, hits jobs. It is also bad for savers and pensioners. This country has paid a heavy price for successive booms and busts. The previous Government delivered two of the deepest recessions since the war, partly because of their misjudgments. Because of that legacy, our long-term interest rates are higher than they should have been, and higher than those in many of our competitor countries. We know that, business knows that, the whole country knows that.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): The Government have now agreed in principle on the policy of preparing for entry to monetary union. Given that the Bank can operate short-term interest rates only on the terms that the Chief Secretary has already outlined, what will the Government do to bring about convergence on short-term interest rates before preparing the ground for possible entry?

Mr. Darling: The thrust of the Government's policy is to achieve stability so that we can have long-term growth and low inflation. That will allow us to compete and converge with other European economies. Regardless of monetary union, the policies outlined by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in his Budget, coupled with the Bill, will be good for the country and good for business. It happens that it is in the country's long-term interests to ensure stability between ourselves and our competitor countries. The Bill will achieve that.

Mr. Peter Bottomley *rose—*

Mr. Darling: To stop the hon. Gentleman, I shall certainly give way.

Mr. Bottomley: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to ask a question, rather than to stop me. During the next two or three years—to the middle of this Parliament—does the right hon. Gentleman expect that the major gap between interest rates in the United Kingdom and those in countries planning to be in the first wave of economic and monetary union will stay the same, increase or reduce? Is it simply a matter for the Bank of England, or do the Government estimate that economic and financial considerations will come together to produce a reduction in the interest rate gap?

Mr. Darling: I am not sure that I follow what the hon. Gentleman is saying. The Government's objective is to ensure that interest rates are as low as possible, but we cannot do that until we take the necessary action to get inflation out of the system. The new framework in the Bill will not only deliver low inflation, but generate greater confidence in long-term decision making in Britain, which will lead to lower interest rates still.

We have already seen some of the benefits. Britain's long-term interest rates fell immediately following the Chancellor's announcement of 6 May. Since then, they have remained nearly a full percentage point lower, so we have already seen the gain.

In the modern economy, markets will demand increasing openness and transparency in decision making, and that is one of the purposes of the Bill. They will want to know that the Government—and any future British Government—are fully signed up to low inflation and have the determination and the institutions to see that commitment through. Most people will recognise that there can be no return to the old ways of monetary targets announced and abandoned—sometimes quietly and sometimes not so quietly—of nods and winks, and of decisions taken behind closed doors that characterised much of the past 18 years.

Instead, there is a new way. The responsibilities of the Chancellor and the Bank are clearly set out, and no one is in any doubt about the Government's policy and our commitment to low inflation. The Bill will enable us to deliver that objective. We have an opportunity to usher in a new era of stability and a platform on which to build for the future. That will be good for the country and for business.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): As the House knows, the Government are committed in principle to entering a single currency. Has he not observed that, on previous occasions when Britain has been part of fixed exchange rates—during our membership of the exchange rate mechanism in 1990-92 and during our membership of the gold standard in 1925-31—interest rates rose to an inappropriate level? It was only when we left those fixed exchange rate mechanisms that interest rates fell away and economic activity recommenced. Would it not be rash to take us back into fixed exchange rates with the risk that, once again, interest rates will rise to a wholly inappropriate level?

Mr. Darling: I know that the hon. Gentleman and some of his hon. Friends are obsessed with all matters European, but it is worth reminding him that, during much of the 1980s, when we were not part of a fixed exchange rate, interest rates were extremely high. In 1979, the rate of interest reached 17 per cent., in 1981, it was 16 per cent. and in 1985, it was 14 per cent. Inflation was also high. In 1980, it reached 21 per cent. That had nothing to do with the fixed exchange rate. It had rather more to do with the way in which—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It was a Labour Government.

Mr. Darling: If I am not mistaken, Lady Thatcher was Prime Minister in 1981 and in 1985, but perhaps Opposition Members would prefer to forget that.

The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) mentioned our economic policy. Let me remind the House of what we have done in the six months since we won the election. We have begun to deliver the key measures that we believe will build prosperity in future.

First, we are committed to economic stability and low inflation. In our manifesto, we said that we would reform the Bank of England to ensure that decision making on monetary policy was more effective, open and accountable, and free from scope for political manipulation. We are delivering that promise with the Bill.

Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in his Budget the deficit reduction plan, cutting the high borrowing requirement left by the previous Government from £22.75 billion last year. We need to achieve stability in public finances so that we can meet our priorities for education, higher investment, health and long-term fiscal stability.

Thirdly, in the comprehensive spending review that I announced in the House on 11 June, we will deliver sustainable public finances and we will be able to reshape and set the Government's spending priorities.

Fourthly, we are removing barriers to growth and removing inflationary pressure. We are expanding our economic capacity, and thus generating the right climate for high levels of investment. That is why we cut corporation tax in the Budget—to the lowest level ever. We are modernising the welfare state, and investing in skills and education so that we can expand the capacity of the economy.

Fifthly, we are committed to open markets and to constructive engagement in Europe, as the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have made clear. We are preparing the country for the future because we put our national economic interests first. Business knows what is good for business, even if the Tories do not.

The Bill marks another milestone in our determination to modernise Britain's economy. We are creating a modern Bank which will meet the new requirements of the 21st century in a global economy in which clarity of purpose is essential.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): A few moments ago, the right hon. Gentleman seemed to imply that he did not expect that conflict would ever occur between the objectives of low inflation, growth and higher employment. Does not the Bill contemplate that such conflict might arise? It states that the pursuit of growth and employment can be followed by the Bank of England, but subject to the overriding requirement to hit the inflation target.

I agree that low inflation normally goes with high employment, the creation of jobs and low unemployment, but we all know that economic shocks can hit countries. Circumstances can arise in which, in the short to medium term, hitting the inflation target can be damaging to the levels of unemployment and of growth. Why is responsibility handed to the Bank with a legal injunction that the inflation target should always be pre-eminent—in all circumstances and at all times in the future?

Mr. Darling: I appreciate that all former Chancellors of the Exchequer have to defend their position, especially those from the recent past, but I am sure that the right hon. and learned Gentleman agrees that, in the long run, it is not possible to achieve high levels of employment if we have high levels of inflation. We are agreed on that. I shall return shortly to the provision in the Bill to which he refers, but it is clear that, if the inflation target will not be met—for example, because of a shock—and the Monetary Policy Committee has to take the necessary steps to reduce inflation, it has to have regard to the Government's policy for growth and employment to temper what it might otherwise be tempted to do.

The formulation, as I am sure the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, is common in most independent central banks. The objective is clear—the Bank has to maintain price stability and meet the inflation target set by the Chancellor of the day. In fixing its interest rate structure, the Bank also has to have regard to the Government's overall economic policy. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman said, there is sometimes a tension between the two in the short term, but—in the long term—unless we have low inflation we will not have the high levels of growth that we all want.

I shall move on to the responsibility of the Government, as opposed to that of the Bank, because the Bill sets in place a clear division of responsibility. The Chancellor sets the target for price stability and he will do so every year. The target announced by the Chancellor earlier this year provides a more rigorous, open and precise definition—a target of 2.5 per cent., which is a constant target. The Bank, for its part, has the responsibility for achieving that target and maintaining the long-term price stability that I mentioned. It must also support the economic policy of the Government, including their objectives for growth and employment. Therefore, the Bank and the world at large will be clear about its objective of stability in support of the objectives of growth and employment.

The composition of the Monetary Policy Committee itself will ensure a broader base of decision making than in the past. No one individual can dominate. It will be a blend of experience from the Bank and outsiders appointed by the Governor and the Chancellor for their knowledge and experience. The decisions will also be free from party political manipulation. The interests of the country will come before the interests of the party of government, especially one about to face an election. Decisions will be made with the long-term interests of the economy in mind.

The Bill ensures that there will be a level of accountability that we have not seen in practice before, not just to the Chancellor, but to Parliament. The Bill proposes three elements that will achieve increased accountability.

First, the MPC must meet rigorous reporting requirements. It is required to announce all its interest rate decisions immediately. Minutes of each meeting will be published and, if there is a vote, the voting record of each member will be recorded.

The Bank's quarterly inflation report will be put on a statutory basis for the first time. That is another instrument of accountability and one of the principal ways in which the explanations of the MPC can be assessed and be subject to scrutiny outside the Bank. The House will have ample opportunity to scrutinise the Bank through the Treasury Select Committee, which now has far greater responsibility. The Bank will be held to account, and the Committee has already made it clear that it will expect MPC members to appear before it.

Mr. Forth: The right hon. Gentleman is introducing the element of accountability, and it is at least arguable

[Mr. Forth]

that his definition is correct and valid—that merely reporting to another body involves accountability. Some might say that true accountability would involve the ability of another body to remove those who make the wrong decisions. Is he prepared to take the risk that, if those making the crucial decisions get them wrong—not just once, but repeatedly—nothing can be done to affect their position or to remove them, particularly by the House of Commons?

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman has been a Member longer than I have and he might agree—when he is in a less partisan mode—that there have been many occasions when Members of all parties have wondered whether the doctrine of accountability has fallen by the wayside. In the previous Parliament and the one before, I cannot remember any Minister resigning because of policy failure. They might have resigned for other, extraneous reasons, but not very often for policy failure.

The Chancellor is accountable to the House, which can express its displeasure with him or her on any appropriate occasion. The MPC will, in practice, be more accountable and answerable than ever before. The MPC must account for its decisions, and it will appear before the Select Committee, which is able to pass any judgment it thinks fit. The House will have an opportunity through a debate—certainly once a year, but also in other economic debates—to make clear its views. Until now, we may have had theoretical accountability in relation to the policy of price stability and interest rates, but it has not always been so. Through the Bill and other measures, we are setting in place a system of accountability that, frankly, has not existed until now.

Ms Abbott: On the question of accountability and the use of the Treasury Select Committee as a medium, the Bank already gives evidence to the Select Committee several times a year, and it is not expected that it will appear more often. If the Government were serious about making the MPC accountable to Parliament, would they not have made it possible for the Treasury Select Committee to hold confirmatory hearings of the MPC?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend will know that the Select Committee has made that recommendation. When I appeared before it last week, I made it clear that the Government have an open mind on the matter, but I also made it clear that I thought that the Committee could discharge its obligations and responsibilities to hold the MPC to account whether or not it had those powers. I do not regard the Committee's having those powers as an essential precondition to its holding the MPC to account.

For the sake of completeness, I said also that, were the House to decide to go down that road, I would find it difficult to see how it could confine confirmatory hearings to simply the MPC. After all, Ministers appoint many people who have influence not only in economic fields, such as the regulators, but in other, sometimes controversial, areas—the head of the Prison Service, for one. We have an open mind on the matter, and the House will need to consider it in due course.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): I thank my right hon. Friend for his favourable response to the Select Committee report in which we envisage seeing the Governor of the Bank of England—and members of the MPC—a great deal more.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): Terrorise them.

Mr. Radice: Terrorism is not necessarily the best way of enhancing accountability.

My right hon. Friend says that it is a question of considering the issue of confirmatory hearings across the board, so would he be prepared to refer it to the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons?

Mr. Darling: As my hon. Friend knows, I do not have the power to refer the matter to the Modernisation Select Committee, but I undertake to discuss it with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Can the Chief Secretary confirm that his definition of an open mind was to say that in Committee he would reject any amendment to provide for a measure such as we have been discussing?

Mr. Darling: I said that I thought that it would be difficult for the Government and the House to come to a concluded view on whether confirmatory hearings would be desirable, not only here but across the board, by the time that the Bill goes to Committee, which, if it achieves Second Reading at 10 pm tonight—I would not want to anticipate anything—will be fairly shortly. I think that my open mind is maintained.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I shall give way again shortly, but I should like to make some progress.

Before we leave the subject of the Select Committee, the point should be made that the very fact that all the information is published and the discussions are open will in itself create far greater accountability. There is far more interest in these matters than ever before, and that is a direct result of our determination to modernise the decision-making process.

Secondly, I want to spell out the procedure to be followed when the Bank misses its inflation target, because hon. Members have asked me about it.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Mr. Darling: I want to develop the theme just a little, and then I will let the hon. Gentleman intervene.

The Chancellor has laid down a new procedure whereby, when the Monetary Policy Committee believes that inflation is more than 1 per cent. higher or lower than the target, the Bank will be required to publish an open letter explaining why the inflation target has failed to be met and what action it intends to take to get back on target. Again, there is a new clarity and transparency.

The Bank must set out why, in its view, the target was missed; what action it has taken; how long it will take to get back on target; and, importantly, how the measures that it proposes are consistent with its monetary policy

objective of price stability and its duty to support the Government's growth and employment objectives. The Monetary Policy Committee will be forced to reveal in public the action that it proposes to take to get back on target. The procedure is open and, therefore, accountable.

Thirdly, there will be increased accountability through reform of the Bank's constitution.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) *rose—*

Mr. Darling: I am looking forward to this, because perhaps, for the first time in six months, the Opposition will tell us whether they oppose the principle of the Bill.

Mr. Lilley: I shall certainly tell the Chief Secretary about that in my speech.

How would the House exercise accountability if we thought that the Bank was proposing to reach its target either too rapidly or too slowly, and how would the Government, if they reached the same conclusion, influence the Bank's decisions?

Mr. Darling: It is nice to know that, if nothing else, the Conservatives are now the champions of the House, which is something that I had not noticed in the past 10 years. The Bank will explain its position in its letter and can be held to account. The Chancellor can respond to what the Bank says, as indeed can the House, through the Treasury Select Committee or, if appropriate, a debate on the Floor of the House.

The very fact that so many people have the opportunity to comment, inside the House and out, brings to bear far greater pressure and influence than have ever existed before. Fundamentally, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Chancellor is accountable to the House. If the House believes that the Chancellor is failing, it can make its views known.

Part I gives an enhanced role to the non-executive directors of the Bank, who will ensure that the Bank performs its functions effectively and manages its resources efficiently. There will be a new post for a senior member who will lead the non-executive directors. They will review the Bank's performance, including, under clause 16, the procedures of the Monetary Policy Committee, and publish a report each year.

There are three measures, all new, that add up to far greater accountability than we have ever had before in practice.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The right hon. Gentleman made much play of accountability and mentioned that we could have a debate on any failings in the system as and when they occur. Given that the Government will ultimately control the questions that lie at the heart of the Bill, does he agree that there is a strong case, if things go awry, for having a free vote in the House?

Mr. Darling: I understand why the hon. Gentleman wants free votes. I was under the impression that he has always exercised the right to a free vote, especially on European matters. He should take the matter up with his Whips, if he is on speaking terms with them.

Part I also makes provision for the Bank's finances, to ensure that they are on a secure foundation for the future. The House is probably aware that the Bank has long been funded by a voluntary arrangement from the banking sector. We are putting the main features of the existing scheme on a permanent statutory basis. It is therefore appropriate that all those who benefit from price stability and the Bank's role in the financial system should pay—building societies as well as banks.

With the transfer of banking supervision to the new Financial Services Authority, there is an opportunity to look at the overall impact on the financial sector of charges. We want to ensure not only that regulation is effective but that the costs are fully justified. For that reason, we are consulting on the cash ratio deposit scheme during the passage of the Bill. I want to make it clear that the intention is that the overall cost to the financial sector should be no greater than before, and preferably less. Both the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority will bear down on the costs to the industry, and therefore on the costs that have to be borne by the public.

Part III transfers banking supervision from the Bank of England to the new single regulator, the Financial Services Authority.

Mr. Gibb: Before moving to part III, can the right hon. Gentleman point out where in the Bill there is any mention of the Treasury Select Committee? Are we to rely on its existing powers and the letter from the Chancellor to its Chairman of 6 May?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is new to the House. The powers and constitution of Select Committees are a matter for the House, and, quite rightly, not for the Government of the day. The House decides what powers the Treasury Select Committee or any other Select Committee should have.

Part III is the first step of a much wider reform that we promised and is the result of four years of consultation when we were in opposition. As the House knows, the Government are drafting a financial services reform Bill that will finally lay to rest the discredited system of self-regulation and put in place a regulator with clout and with respect at home and throughout the world.

Two weeks ago, we launched the Financial Services Authority, which has taken over from the Securities and Investments Board. Nine existing regulators will be replaced by only one. Yet again, we are delivering on our promises. The previous Government talked about cutting red tape; we are doing it.

Mr. Lilley: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with these comments about that approach:

"A blanket approach, the creation of a 'super-regulator', won't do. I know that it makes for convenient shorthand but the idea that if all the regulators are rounded up and put into one building then we will have a system that will solve all our problems simply won't wash"?

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman should be wary of quoting selectively from my speeches. I recognise the passage. If he cared to quote the entire speech—I do not expect him to do so this afternoon, but perhaps he could if he is on the Standing Committee—he would find that I was talking about a sudden and immediate change. We propose a gradual change.

The first stage is in the Bill—the banking supervisory functions discharged by the Bank of England are being transferred to the Financial Services Authority. It will

[Mr. Darling]

gradually take over the work of the existing self-regulatory bodies and, ultimately, that of the Department of Trade and Industry's insurance division which is at present the responsibility of the Treasury on an interim basis. Ultimately, those will all come together.

If the right hon. Gentleman reads that and other speeches that I have made on the subject in the past four years, he will realise that we always had it in mind that we wanted to bring together the regulators in a manageable way as the distinctions between the areas in which they work became increasingly blurred. Interestingly, although I have been speaking for about 25 minutes, we have yet to hear whether the Opposition are for or against the Bill.

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I welcome my right hon. Friend's proposals for the independent supervision of banks. He will not be aware of this, but in another part of the House today a meeting was taking place of the former depositors with the Bank of Credit and Commerce International. He knows that in 1991, when that bank closed, our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was then in opposition, made a strong and impassioned plea for an independent supervisory system. Does he hope that, as a result of these moves by the Government, there will be greater scrutiny of banks to prevent a repeat of the sort of tragedy that occurred for the victims of BCCI?

Mr. Darling: I have great sympathy with what my hon. Friend says. Part of the problem with the self-regulatory system that existed in the 1980s was that, in many cases, the regulators turned a blind eye to what was going on. Certainly, in the case of pensions mis-selling, the industry knew that it was going on, but the regulators chose to do nothing about it.

On banking supervision, my hon. Friend will know that we have made a number of suggestions over the years to improve the situation following the collapse of BCCI and then Barings. As I shall shortly outline, we have taken further steps to ensure that one of the problems that emerged with both BCCI and Barings—that each regulator did not know what the other was doing—will be dealt with. He is right to say that bringing the regulators together will not merely have the advantage of getting rid of a cumbersome and expensive system that is fundamentally flawed in concept, but will ensure that regulation is complementary to the business process and not a hindrance. That will give consumers and the public alike the confidence in the integrity of the system that is lacking.

In the week in which the new FSA came into existence, recognising the fact that the industry transcends political and geographic boundaries, it signed a memorandum of understanding with the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission in the United States.

As my hon. Friend will know, the collapse of both Barings and BCCI showed that it is necessary to have a domestic regulator that has sufficient clout and reputation to deal with its international counterparts. That will now be possible with the new FSA.

As with the second part of the Bill, the objective of the reform is to enhance transparency and improve accountability, through a simpler framework for the industry, and to have a new system that recognises that the industry is changing fast. As I said, the traditional boundaries between banks, insurance companies and building societies have become increasingly blurred and, with most institutions offering a wide range of financial services, the world has moved on. Regulatory reform was inevitable and, indeed, it is what the industry and the public want.

The old system was far too fragmented and it was very costly, whereas the new system will deliver better regulation. The unprecedented scope of the powers of the FSA will, of course, ensure a better co-ordinated approach. It will also have a specific duty to root out bad practice and financial crime—something which is necessary if we are to ensure that the United Kingdom continues to enjoy its international reputation in financial business for clean markets and fair dealings. Our standard of living and the long-term future of this country depend on that market. The FSA will be at the cutting edge of improving regulation and supervision here and throughout the world.

Of course, the Bank of England retains responsibility for the stability of the financial system, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear, but the Bill transfers the supervisory functions to the FSA and, in due course, the Department of Trade and Industry staff responsible for insurance regulation will join the FSA, along with the other self-regulating bodies. That process is already under way, thanks to a great deal of hard work by the staff of the various regulators. The change will be manageable and, at all times, the staff of the FSA will ensure that they keep their eye on the ball and retain a firm grip on day-to-day events in the marketplace.

As I told my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), we have announced a further step in the modernisation of the system of regulation. We believe that there must be clear divisions of responsibility between the Treasury, the Bank and the FSA, and we have set those out in a new memorandum of understanding that was signed by the Governor, by the chairman of the FSA and by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor two weeks ago. A copy is in the Library. The memorandum is based on principles of clarity, transparency, elimination of duplication and regular exchange of information between the three institutions. It also establishes a standing committee which will meet regularly to ensure an appropriate and co-ordinated response to any future failure or collapse.

Finally, part IV contains two additional measures. First, the Bill makes provision to improve the efficiency of the gilts market, so that we can cut costs; secondly, it provides for the modernisation of the central money markets office to allow the market to work with computer records alone. Those measures will not only reduce costs, but strengthen London's position as an international financial centre.

As I move toward the conclusion of my speech, the official Opposition have yet to let us know where they stand. They did not tell us when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made his statement to the House in May. At least on the question of Europe, we know where they stand—or at least where some of them stand—and we know that they have a policy that has put them on a collision course with business, which knows that the

national economic interest must come first. Indeed, I noticed in *The Sunday Telegraph* that the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury said:

"The CBI is bad news for British industry".

There we have it: the Conservative party does not think much of what business thinks.

What is the Opposition policy on the Bank of England? I have searched long and hard over the past few weeks to find a single word from the shadow Chancellor, but I have found nothing. We might have hoped that there would be an amendment before us today that spelled out the Conservative party's position, but there is nothing.

When the shadow Chancellor replies to the debate, perhaps he will answer the two central questions relating to this issue that any respectable Opposition must answer. First, does he support the decision to give operational responsibility to the Bank of England—yes or no? [*Interruption.*] Secondly, if he does not—as some Opposition Members are mumbling—will he follow the logic of that position and pledge that, at the next election, the Conservative party will campaign to repeal this Act, as the Bill will be by then? Can he answer that, yes or no? We would like to know and business wants to know the answer to those fundamental questions. The whole world—or perhaps only the Conservative party—awaits his reply.

In just a few short months, the Government have made significant reforms to the institutions and practice of economic policy in this country. We have new fiscal rules and a five-year deficit reduction plan and we have introduced major corporate tax reform, a windfall tax on the privatised utilities and a new deal for young people and the long-term unemployed. We reformed the financing of higher education, and we have a new £1.3 billion capital fund to rebuild schools. We have a UK action plan for employment and flexibility in Europe, and we introduced tough legislation on competition policy. We have a new structure for financial regulation and we have given operational independence to a reformed Bank of England.

That is just the start—there is more to come, including the pre-Budget report later this month; capital gains tax reform; consultation on the new individual savings account; the Taylor review of taxes and benefits; the Low Pay Commission report on the minimum wage, and more. The Government are committed to reform and modernisation, and we are delivering. We have taken those decisions because we know that they are right for this country. We have demonstrated our clarity of purpose and our commitment to stability with an open and accountable central bank. Yet again, we have shown that we are preparing this country for the future, at home and in Europe. We are making the tough decisions and putting in place the institutions to deliver economic stability and growth, so that everyone can share in higher living standards and greater job opportunities in future. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.28 pm

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): The handling and contents of the Bill reflect four of the Government's most worrying characteristics. The first is their contempt for the parliamentary process. The Chancellor could not be bothered to wait to inform the House of what the Prime Minister described as

"the biggest step in economic policy-making since world war two",

and instead announced it when the House was not sitting. Nor does he even deign to introduce the Bill himself—a Bill that hands away his most important responsibility. He will not even speak at his own abdication.

Secondly, the principal components of the Bill show a cavalier disregard for assurances given a few months before the election. On 7 February 1997, the Chancellor said the following about giving the bank independence:

"I believe that any consideration of whether to give the Bank operational responsibility for setting interest rates must be preceded by two steps",

one of which is that

"the Bank must demonstrate a successful track record in its advice and build greater credibility."

Mr. Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: I will in a second, but I thought that the Chancellor might want to intervene and explain what track record was established in the first four days of this Parliament that enabled him to set aside an assurance given authoritatively to the British people not long before the general election, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman can give me information that the Chancellor seems reluctant to give the House.

Mr. Cranston: Can the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what the Conservative party, if returned to government, would do about the Bill? Would it repeal it?

Mr. Lilley: I can tell the hon. Gentleman in detail my position on the principle, and I will tell him my response to that and all such questions, which I have given previously: we will never give a knee-jerk commitment from the Dispatch Box to repeal decisions taken by the Government until we prepare our manifesto. We shall not get into the position that the Labour party did by endlessly promising to repeal things and then not doing so.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with the former Chancellor, Norman Lamont, that the Conservative party should agree with its principle, and should go ahead and support the Government?

Mr. Lilley: I shall explain that in two minutes with great clarity, if the hon. Gentleman will allow me to complete my point.

Mr. Darling: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: All right.

Mr. Darling: It would help the House if the right hon. Gentleman would confirm a point. Do I take it from his answer a moment ago that he is saying that the Conservative party will not, therefore, campaign to repeal the Bill if it is enacted?

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman has heard me say before, and will hear me say again, that we will give no knee-jerk commitments to repeal Bills passed by the House, even if we oppose them. Shortly before the next general election, we shall consider which measures the

[Mr. Lilley]

Government have undertaken that we can afford to repeal, amend or retain, and we shall do so then, not piecemeal during this Parliament. That is the sensible and responsible thing to do.

The other aspect of the Bill is the establishment of a "super-SIB", and that too is in flat contradiction of statements by the Chief Secretary, as I exposed earlier. He had previously said that the creation of a super-regulator would not do, and he actually had the cheek to say that he was fulfilling a promise by bringing all the regulators together in one.

The third weakness of the Government exemplified by the Bill is their penchant for making glib, headline-grabbing statements and announcements without thinking through the substance first. They announced the Bank's quasi-independence, then decided to deprive it of responsibility for banking regulation, nearly precipitating the Governor's resignation. They have also had to chop and change their inflationary target and its form, and the Bill is littered with consequences that, manifestly, the Government have not thought through, as I shall explain.

Finally, the Bill is yet another example of the Government's desire to remove power from the House and from elected representatives and give it away to appointed officials. They want to escape the blame for difficult decisions, and they want to remove any influence from Labour Back Benchers, whose demands for higher spending and laxer policy have wrecked every previous Labour Government.

That brings me directly—

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) *rose—*

Mr. Lilley: If I may make some progress, the hon. Gentleman may find that I answer the question that he has been prompted to ask.

That brings me to the central issue of the role, accountability and independence of the Bank and of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I shall explain where we stand on that issue. Conservatives have always been the enemies of inflation, because inflation harms the poor and the weak. Moreover, we have realised for far longer than Labour Members that inflation is essentially a monetary phenomenon. We have always believed that the Bank of England, through interest rate and funding policy, plays a key role in controlling inflation.

As long ago as 1977, in the seminal work—which I know the Chancellor has committed to memory—"The Right Approach to the Economy", the party said that we favoured a more independent role for the Bank of England. A range of views were held then—and have been held since—about how much and what sort of independence the Bank should be given. We spelled out in practice the type of independence that we thought right in the final years of our Administration.

The right hon. Gentleman may wish to remind me that, in November 1988, the then Chancellor, now Lord Lawson, drew up his specific proposal for giving the Bank operational independence. Although I was a very junior Minister at the time, I had some responsibility for banks, and I was therefore the only Minister consulted about the proposal before it went to the Prime Minister. The view that I expressed then to the Chancellor is that which I hold now: the proposal has obvious attractions in reinforcing the battle against inflation, but it is difficult to square it with our system of parliamentary government.

It is right to give the Bank the independence and the authority—which we did subsequently—to offer the sort of advice that Chancellors cannot easily refuse by publicising its views and its minutes, by making its inflation report independent of the Treasury, and so on. We have done that effectively.

However, controlling inflation by interest policy is a technical matter that cannot simply be handed over to a group of experts. It involves considerable discretion, and that discretion affects people's livelihoods, their jobs, the value of their savings, the viability of their businesses and the burden of their debts. Such matters are absolutely central to the whole political debate, and they are crucial to the electorate. Whoever takes those decisions must be answerable to the House, and, through us, to the voters. Someone must carry the can—and that person should be the Chancellor.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman described the Bank of England's decision to put up interest rates last week as a "kick in the guts". The inflation figures were released today. Who does he think was right? What would he have done, and how would he have justified his actions?

Mr. Lilley: I certainly would not have introduced the sort of Budget that, in light of the Bank of England's statements, made increases in interest rates inevitable if the Chancellor failed to take the Bank's advice.

Mr. Darling: The right hon. Gentleman seems to have moved from the position where he appreciated the attractions of Lord Lawson's memorandum to the then Prime Minister. He has said that, because of what he regards as parliamentary sovereignty, he cannot support the principle of giving operational responsibility to the Bank of England. How does he square that view with the commitment he gave a few moments ago that he will have to wait and see if it works? If he opposes the move on principle, surely the answer must be beyond doubt—as it is for him on Europe.

Mr. Lilley: The right hon. Gentleman keeps trying to make policies on principle without telling us what the principles are. Accountability is very important. The Chancellor should accept responsibility for important matters such as people's jobs, and the value of their savings and their debts. We cannot accept his attempt to try to escape the blame for taking difficult decisions.

Whatever the views on either side of the House about delegating the Chancellor's responsibilities to an independent Bank, the Conservatives cannot support a Bill that transfers those powers to a Bank that has been made deliberately less independent.

The Monetary Policy Committee that will set interest rates will have nine members. No fewer than seven of those will be appointed by the Chancellor, and even the other two will be appointed by the governor

"after consultation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer".

Moreover, they will be appointed for just three years. Members of the Bank's court will have their term reduced to three years. No other central Bank in the world, to my knowledge, has its directors appointed for a term of office shorter than the life of the Government who appoint them.

I am not suggesting that the worthy men and women appointed to the monetary policy committee and the court will all take instructions from the Chancellor.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: I will in a moment, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I am not suggesting that members of the monetary policy committee will take instructions directly from the Chancellor, but we should recall what has happened elsewhere. Professor Gowland records in an interesting book published by Politeia that at the Federal Reserve in America the chairman appointed by Nixon was so anxious

"to facilitate Richard Nixon's re-election in 1972"

that it

"took precedence over all other objectives. He was apparently prepared to manipulate interest rates at the President's request."

No one suggests that anyone on this side of the Atlantic would give in to such pressures, but those appointed by a Chancellor on short-term contracts might be eager to secure re-appointment, and people would not have faith in their genuine independence. That must undermine the credibility and real independence of the Bank.

Ms Abbott: I know that consistency is an over-rated virtue, but if the right hon. Gentleman is against independence for the Bank of England in principle, he ought to be reassured that the Chancellor will ostensibly have so much power over the monetary committee.

Mr. Lilley: The worst of both worlds would be a bank that was influenced by the Chancellor, but for which he would not take responsibility to the House. That is precisely what he is creating through the Bill. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington for giving me the opportunity to make that point, and for her considerable contributions on the subject, which I have read with great interest.

The very least that we will demand if the Bill is passed is the lengthening of terms of tenure and the ratification of all appointments by the Select Committee, as recommended in its excellent report. We believe that the Bank should have independence to offer advice, which the Chancellor would find it difficult to refuse. That independence should be clear, visible, laid down in law and enshrined in the terms of appointment and tenure of members of the court and the Bank. We do not believe, however, that the Chancellor should escape his ultimate responsibility for final decisions on interest rates.

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): It is appropriate that the right hon. Gentleman should give way at the point when he is discussing short-term contracts and security of tenure. If his performance does not improve in this debate and others, perhaps that is what we will be talking about this afternoon.

You said earlier that it would be sensible not to rule anything out and not to give any commitments. Why then, on the single European currency, are the Opposition committing themselves not for one term of office, but for two? Is that sensible or senseless?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. May I remind the hon. Gentleman that at all times he is addressing the Chair, not the Opposition?

Mr. Lilley: The answer is that the Government have already begun to campaign for entry to the single European currency in the next Parliament, and we have begun to campaign against it. That is sensible in the circumstances. It has nothing to do with the repealing measures taken by the Government in this Parliament.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on that?

Mr. Lilley: On that, or on the subject of the debate?

Mr. Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his speech that the Bill hands away the Chancellor's most important responsibility. If that is what he believes, should he not be taking it back, not seeking to create an independence that is irreversible?

Mr. Lilley: We want the Bank to be independent, and those who are members of the court to be independent in offering advice, not in operational control of interest rates. That is the system which we had established in the previous Parliament, and it was working well. The question is whether it would work better as a result of the changes that the Government propose.

I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) that the system manifestly was working well. It has given us the longest period of low inflation for half a century—almost 60 months below 4 per cent. By the end of the previous Parliament, it enabled the previous Chancellor to hit his inflationary target of 2.5 per cent. on the button. That is the key part of the golden economic legacy that the previous Government bequeathed to this one.

If a system works, after half a century of failure, we are reluctant to tear it up and make substantial changes. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Mr. Charles Clarke (Norwich, South): The right hon. Gentleman was discussing the manipulation of interest rates a few moments ago. Does he concede that the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), was involved in precisely such manipulation of interest rates before the general election, and that the system set in place by the Bill would prevent Chancellors from conducting such political manipulation?

Mr. Lilley: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the speech by the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, in which she said:

"In May 1995,"

the

"then Chancellor refused to accept the Governor's advice . . . Two years later, we know that the former Chancellor's judgment was correct . . . he consistently called the economy right more times than Eddie George."

[Mr. Lilley]

The hon. Lady is right. Over that period, we had the opportunity to see that my right hon. and learned Friend was right. His judgment has proved impeccable, and it is clear that the present Chancellor does not believe that he could emulate the success of my right hon. and learned Friend.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that tribute on the policies on which we agreed before the election. Is he aware that his clear description of the desirability of a monetary committee being entirely independent to give advice to the Chancellor is Labour party policy from the last general election? Its 1997 business manifesto stated:

"For the Bank of England, we propose a new monetary policy committee to decide on the advice which the Bank of England should give to the Chancellor."

How could a reputable Opposition change their mind so dramatically four days after the election, and now attack the shadow Chancellor for adhering to their former views?

Mr. Lilley: I entirely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. It is alarming that the Government intend to make the Bank less independent, as well as giving it different responsibilities. That is a serious matter, which we shall continue to criticise during the passage of the Bill.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Is not the danger of the Government's proposals that a Chancellor such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who has good judgment, was able to prolong the economic cycle, whereas a Chancellor who has no judgment at all has to hand over weighty decisions to an independent governor? Bankers are always cautious. The proposal is therefore likely to be deflationary, and will have the effect of shortening the economic cycle. Is not that a considerable danger?

Mr. Lilley: That fear is shared on both sides of the House, although evidently not on the Government Front Bench. I shall deal with that in due course.

Many hon. Members on both sides argue that several other countries, which have a longer track record of low inflation than we do, have independent central banks, but I believe that independent banks are as much a symptom as a cause of low inflation.

The German Bundesbank is independent and able to take tough action without losing its independence because Germany has experienced two periods of hyper-inflation. That has created an inflationary culture. It is worth remembering that the Reichsbank had independence in the early 1920s, but that did not prevent the hyper-inflation then.

Britain has now developed an anti-inflationary culture. That is partly a reaction to the near-hyper-inflation under the previous Government, when money lost a quarter of its value in a single year—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I mean the previous Labour Government. I am grateful to the Chancellor for reminding me that we achieved the best inflationary record in half a century.

The anti-inflationary culture in Britain is also the result of the demise of the Keynesian illusion that was prevalent among the opinion-forming class in Britain—the belief that monetary demand was the cause of economic growth. Even the Labour party leadership—the last group to learn—now accepts that inflationary demand brings no extra growth in the long term, and may even damage the underlying potential.

The more the detailed proposals set out in the Bill have been examined, the more are the concerns that have been expressed—concerns which many of my right hon. and hon. Friends share. Alas, few of these concerns were addressed by the Chief Secretary. I hope that the Economic Secretary, if the hon. Lady is to reply, will valiantly cover these matters.

A key concern is whether an independent bank, even a quasi-independent one as is proposed, will have a deflationary bias, as my hon. Friend hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) suggested. We are all agreed that inflationary finance cannot generate sustainable jobs and growth; indeed, it may even undermine them. A deflationary bias, however, would be even more destructive of jobs.

The primary duty of the Bank in the terms of the Bill is to meet its inflationary target. It is my understanding that that overrides its secondary responsibility to support the Government's economic policy, including their objectives for growth and employment. The Chief Secretary seemed muddled on that, and tried to obfuscate the issue. The Bill is clear, however, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, said.

Will the Chief Secretary confirm that, if there is a conflict between the inflationary target and the Government's other policies, the inflationary target will take precedence? The right hon. Gentleman cannot confirm that, but it is set out in the Bill. In those circumstances, the Bank is bound to start by trying to demonstrate its anti-inflationary machismo. We have considerable faith in Eddie George—that is not because I discovered recently that we both went to the same direct grant school—because he seems to be aware that there is a real economy as well as a financial system. I am sure, therefore, that he would not deliberately drive the economy into a slump.

It is worth remembering, however, that the blame for the slump in the 1930s has been laid at the door of the then newly independent Federal Reserve Board. Robert Chote, the economic correspondent of the *Financial Times*, in an excellent Social Market Foundation booklet, quotes a study that shows that countries with independent banks have suffered deeper recessions than those without them.

Central banks with the same independence as the Bank of England has before the Bill comes into force have suffered output losses averaging about 5 per cent. of national output in each recession. Those banks with the independence that the Bank will have as a result of the Bill have suffered output losses averaging at least 10 per cent. of national output.

The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) made a most thought-provoking speech in a recent debate. She reminded us that the reason Labour gave for nationalising the Bank of England in 1945 was that it allegedly played a deflationary role in the inter-war years. I hope that such historic episodes will prove irrelevant. It is just possible, however, that we are approaching a more deflationary era.

It is said that generals are always busy preparing for the previous war, and it would be tragic if our economic leaders were trying to create a solution to the problems of the past 50 years of inflation when the risks may lie in the opposite direction. The Government should give much thought to that before they finalise the Bill.

The Bill separates off the Bank from the Treasury, and strips out a number of functions from the Bank, with no clear evidence that the consequences have been thought through.

How will the Government co-ordinate fiscal and monetary policy? They clearly failed to do so in the recent Budget. Before the Budget, the Bank clearly indicated that, if the Government curbed consumer spending, interest rates need not rise. However, the Chancellor of the Exchequer put almost all his extra tax burden not on consumer spending but on savings, through his pensions tax. That having happened, the Bank immediately resumed raising interest rates.

That is an example of the danger that Robert Chote, in his excellent pamphlet, presciently spelled out, when he wrote:

"One danger"—

Mr. Darling: A straw.

Mr. Lilley: The right hon. Gentleman may think that Robert Chote is a straw, but I think that he made a cogent case in his Social Market Foundation pamphlet, as did Professor Gowland in his Politeia pamphlet.

Robert Chote wrote:

"One danger is that the economy will suffer if the Bank uses interests rate policy to pursue low inflation while the Government uses budgetary policy to pursue employment, growth and votes. This is a recipe for high interest rates, excessive Government borrowing and an overvalued exchange rate."

I hope that the Economic Secretary will tell us how the Government intend to resolve that possible conflict in future better than they did recently.

Mr. Geraint Davies: The right hon. Gentleman seems to be in favour of the principle of independence, but has produced a litany of reasons why we should be against it. Is he against independence? Is he against the interests of business as expressed by the Confederation of British Industry, the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses?

Mr. Lilley: The hon. Gentleman should perhaps read my speech, so that he will be able to take it in word by word.

The Bill will hive off debt management to a new quango under the Treasury. We know that funding policy is an intrinsic part of monetary policy, and the Bill will leave the Bank as a one-club golfer without even a putter left in the bag. How will the Treasury, the Bank and the new board co-operate to handle monetary policy? If they need to get together, why is it necessary to separate them in the first place?

With the removal of banking control to the Financial Services Authority—the "super-SIB"—it is difficult to see how and whether the Bank remains, as it surely must, responsible for ensuring the liquidity of the banking system and preventing systemic collapse.

What happens if the needs of the banking system conflict with those of the inflationary target? That has happened in the past in the United States, and it could conceivably be happening in Japan. I understand that there is a suggestion that a committee is to be established to work between the Bank, the FSA and the Treasury to try to cope with that sort of problem. If that is necessary, why is it necessary to hive off powers in the first place?

That brings me to the creation of the FSA as a super-SIB. The Bill is only part of the process, but it will on implementation directly conflict with pre-election statements. More importantly, concerns expressed by the Chief Secretary when in opposition may, although he has disowned them today, prove well founded.

The coverage of the FSA will be huge; its objectives will be many, and potentially in conflict with one another. The range of its activities will be so diverse that no one person in it will understand them all. Its structure will be as complex as those of the organisations that it replaces, if not more so. Practitioner involvement is likely to diminish, and costs are likely to escalate as salaries are equalised upwards.

We have no objection to the objective of trying to bring greater simplicity and one-stop shopping to the business of financial regulation, but we fear that the Government may, almost casually, have bitten off more than they can chew. The process of setting up the FSA may cause regulators to take their eye off the ball, while spivs and crooks have a field day. We shall observe closely what is going on in the development of the proposed legislation.

Through the Bill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer seeks to create a Bank with a duty to pursue an inflation target set by the Government, and to accommodate other Government policies. The members of the Monetary Policy Committee will be appointed by the Government, and it will, albeit only in a reporting sense, be accountable to Parliament. If need be, the Government, with the assent of Parliament, will be able to override the committee's judgment. We may approve or disapprove of these arrangements, but we can agree that it may claim to be, as the Chancellor asserted in his statement, a British solution to meet Britain's needs.

The paradox is that, no sooner had the Chancellor published his British solution, than he announced that he wanted to sweep it away in a few years' time and replace it with a European solution to meet Europe's needs.

The European solution is, of course, rather different from what the Chancellor thinks is right for Britain's needs. The planned European central bank has no inflation target laid down by a democratically elected Government—still less a Government responsible to the House. Only one of its directors will be British, and he or she will take an oath that they will act not in Britain's particular interests but in the interests of the whole. It will not be accountable to any Parliament or Government, least of all Britain's Parliament or Government. Nor will any Government—certainly not the British Government—be able to override its judgment if they think that the national interest requires it.

Some hon. Members may prefer the approach laid down in the Maastricht treaty to that laid down in the Bill, but it is clear that the Chancellor of the Exchequer does not. If he did, he would have modelled his Bill on the Maastricht

[Mr. Lilley]

paradigm. Can he or the Chief Secretary tell the House why they did not do so? May we assume that they considered their approach superior to the Maastricht model?

Mr. Darling: We introduced the Bill because we thought that it was good for the British economy, regardless of whether this country joins the single currency. Notwithstanding what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about the single currency, does not the logic of his position lead him to exclude this country ever joining the single currency, because of the principles he holds?

Mr. Lilley: The position of the Chief Secretary may well result in that conclusion, because, if he says that measures based on the principles in the Bill are right for Britain, how can he say that different measures based on different principles in the Maastricht treaty are also right for Britain? Why did he not answer that question? Why did not the Government model the Bill on the Maastricht paradigm? Because they believe that the measures in the Bill are superior. Why, then, do they want to trade in the Bill in a few years' time for the Maastricht independent central bank?

Mr. Darling: I wonder why the right hon. Gentleman cannot answer the question that I put to him. The logic of his position on the single currency is that the Conservative party would never ever join the single currency. Is not that right?

Mr. Lilley: The logic of our position is that we can influence only one Parliament—the next Parliament—at a time. The logic of the right hon. Gentleman's position is that, by signing a treaty—*[Interruption.]* The next Parliament is the one that we will influence, when we are in government. The right hon. Gentleman, by treaty, wants to rule out, for all future Parliaments, this country ever having its own currency, its own independent central bank, its own monetary policy. It is he who is taking a decision for all time. Those who do not want to determine our policy by treaty can do that only in one Parliament at a time.

Mr. Darling: Which Parliament?

Mr. Lilley: The Parliament at which we intend to get elected. We did not win in this Parliament, I regret to say, so we have no influence over this Parliament—we have only limited influence, unless we get the support of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington, and teams of her cohorts and colleagues in voting down the Bill tonight. It is a badly drafted, ill-thought-out and potentially damaging Bill.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Did not that little exchange demonstrate precisely the position of Members of Her Majesty's Government? They have not realised yet that they are in government, and that is why they are having to give away these powers to the Bank of England.

Mr. Lilley: It may be that. I can think of only one saving grace in the Bill: it will take decisions away from a Government in whom I have very little confidence, and whom in the few months they have been in office have chalked up a pretty deplorable record.

Until the Bill becomes law, the Chancellor is, in law, personally responsibly for all the decisions on monetary policy that have been taken in this Parliament. Every interest rate rise so far is his personal responsibility. He cannot blame the bank, because it is no more than his adviser, so five Labour interest rate rises so far are at his door.

The reason why the Bank of England has used its quasi-independence to put up interest rates is because the Chancellor failed to curb consumer spending by encouraging people to save their building society windfalls. Instead, he taxed savings with his pensions tax. For the fifth successive month, he has missed his inflation target, as we heard today.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already, and I am drawing to a close.

Today's figures reflect first and foremost the impact—

Ms Ruth Kelly (Bolton, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lilley: No, I shall wind up, if I may.

Today's figures reflect first and foremost the impact of the Chancellor's interest rate rises, which are feeding through to mortgages and the retail price index. His Budget added, by his own calculation, 0.8 per cent. to the retail price index directly.

The Bill is a product of a Government who should be ashamed of their short-term record; who are afraid to take the blame for difficult decisions; who are afraid of their own inability to judge the interests and needs of the British people; who are afraid of their own Back Benchers and wish to deprive them of power. It is a bad Bill, badly drafted and badly motivated. We will not let the Government escape their responsibility. We will vote against the Bill.

5.5 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): One can say that the most controversial part of the Bill—we heard this in the speeches from my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, Central (Mr. Darling) and from the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley)—must be part II. For part II of the Bill seeks to transfer the power to fix short-term interest rates, to conduct monetary policy and, in effect, control inflation, from an elected Chancellor of the Exchequer—who is directly answerable to the House, and through us in the House to the people—to the non-elected officials of the monetary policy committee of the Bank of England.

Fundamental economic decisions that can affect the livelihood of our constituents, be they mortgagors, savers, business people, the unemployed, will be taken out of the domain of an elected Government and elected Parliament. In that regard, economic policy will be taken out of politics. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary calls it modernisation.

The implied message, so far as I can see, that is sent to our constituents by the Chancellor's decision to transfer power is clear: "Don't trust us with your money. We are just politicians. We are Chancellors, Prime Ministers, Ministers, Members of Parliament, politicians, but don't trust us with your mortgages. Don't trust us with your money. Don't trust us with inflation. We cannot be trusted to protect the value of your currency." That is the unappealing implied message that comes, I am sorry to say, from the Chancellor's decision.

We are elected to the House. We enjoy the trappings of power. We obtain from time to time, from the taxpayer, the resources necessary to do our job. Sometimes we complain that we do not have enough. However, when it comes to a tough—that word is used very often these days—decision about money, and no decision is tougher than that to raise or reduce interest rates, I am sorry to say that we abdicate our responsibility and hand over our responsibility as politicians to a non-elected body.

Why stop with monetary policy? What about fiscal policy? I listened to my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary explain how wonderful the new system of accountability would be—how it would be far superior to what we have at the moment. Why not transfer all the Chancellor's powers—that is, what powers he has left? Why not transfer his fiscal powers to a board? Let us call it an Exchequer board, and because it is a board, let us give it a president. An Exchequer board would determine taxation, because if we cannot be trusted with monetary policy, how can we be trusted with taxation policy? Let us shift it all. Indeed, we could move on to the Department of Health, to education. Why not transfer all the power to boards, so that we have that marvellous system of accountability and modernisation that my right hon. Friend tells us about?

It is no exaggeration to say that it was something of a surprise when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a few days after the election that this was to be done. It was a surprise to the City—obviously a pleasant surprise, as the City approved of the decision—and it was a surprise to most of the financial journalists to whom I have spoken. It has been said—although I am sure that it was a scurrilous accusation without foundation—that it was a surprise to most members of the Cabinet. I do not believe that. However, it was certainly a surprise to most of those who fought the election as Labour party candidates.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that giving independence to the Bank so quickly was a complete breach of a clear pledge made by the Prime Minister when he was Leader of the Opposition? In a speech in 1995, he said:

"We will . . . watch the track record of the Bank before deciding what, if any, steps should be taken towards greater operational responsibility for the Bank in interest rate policy."

Mr. Davies: That point has already been made in the debate. Rather than refer to speeches made in opposition, I intend to consult the sacred text of the manifesto.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Mr. Davies: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman again.

Part II of the Bill was not an express term, as we lawyers describe it, in that covenant with the people on which the Prime Minister fought and won the election. Since the announcement, some Treasury Ministers have tried valiantly to reinterpret the text. While their efforts might gain fairly high marks in a school of sophists or a college of casuists, they are not really credible. It is clear that the move was not part of my party's policy.

I will satisfy the hon. Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) by quoting from the business manifesto, which is the most sacred text of all. The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden referred to it in an intervention. It says:

"We propose a new monetary policy committee to decide on the advice which the Bank of England should give to the Chancellor."

Nothing could be clearer than that. However, this Bill is not about advice: it is about power and the transfer of power from the Chancellor to the monetary policy committee of the Bank of England.

Not only was the decision a surprise; it was a contradiction of other areas of Government policy. The thrust of policy—of which I entirely approve—has been and is the greater devolution of power from bureaucracy to democracy. That is one reason why we will establish a Parliament for Scotland and an Assembly for Wales, give greater democracy to the regions of England and have a mayor for London. In all those matters, the whole thrust of Government policy has been to transfer power from bureaucracy back to democracy, where that is possible within the modern state. Now the very heart of Government—the very heart of decision making—is going in the opposite direction and transferring power from democracy to bureaucracy.

This debate takes place against the background of another increase in interest rates. It is tempting for all of us to wonder whether that decision was correct. I shall resist the temptation. I do not know whether it was or was not the right decision. What I do know—and what surprises me—is that some of the bizarre criticisms of the Bank of England have come from financial journalists who actually support the transfer of power from the Treasury and the Chancellor to the Bank of England.

I want to quote part of one article in *The Guardian* last Friday, in which Mr. Alex Brummer wrote:

"The danger of giving the Bank of England operational independence always was that it would show an inflationary bias".

I should not talk about rugby after a Saturday when Llanelli was trounced by the All Blacks, but accusing a central bank of showing inflationary bias is like accusing the All Blacks of a try-scoring bias. Inflationary bias is what central banks are about, especially modern central banks. A long time ago, they were concerned with the external value of the currency, but it was at a time when currencies were not floating. The banks have now moved on to another pitch—the internal value of the currency. Inflation targets are being set, but they were not around when the Federal Reserve or the Bundesbank was established.

The new pitch for power of the central banks is to have an inflationary target—we have it—and then shoot at the target and pretend that somehow interest rates will enable us to hit it. Central banks are about inflationary bias. Mr. Brummer obviously has not read the Bill—or if he has, he has read it in the same way as the Chief Secretary has read it, which is an incorrect way. Clause 11 clearly

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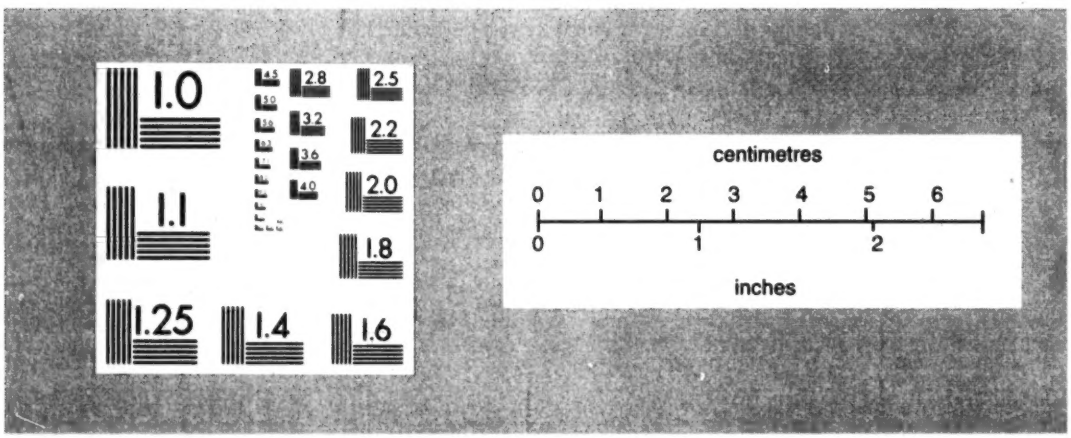

[Mr. Davies]

states that the task of the Bank is to maintain price stability—or, in Mr. Brummer's language, to give an inflationary bias. Only subject to that is the Bank to support the Government's economic policy, including the objectives for growth and unemployment.

That is exactly what is in the Maastricht treaty. I do not want to go down the same road on Europe that the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden rather foolishly followed. We shall have other opportunities to discuss that. The Maastricht treaty is exactly the same as clause 11—although not in words, as it is more elegantly drafted. It, too, says that the first duty is price stability—subject to that, high employment, apple pie and everything else can be considered. The Bank is being asked to make inflationary bias its priority, as *The Guardian* said. Of course, questions of growth and employment should be taken into account as part of all these matters.

I happen to believe that it is wrong to divide fiscal policy and monetary policy. There is no evidence to show that it improves matters. Indeed, there is evidence from Germany just after reunification, and from the United States when President Reagan was pursuing a Keynesian economic policy, that, if there is too loose a fiscal policy, the Bank will over-compensate and have too tight a monetary policy.

I am old-fashioned. I believe in democracy, but I also believe that decisions on fiscal policy and monetary policy cannot be divided. When we are considering growth and employment, decisions should be made by the elected representatives of the people who have to face elections. That may be old-fashioned, but it is the most sensible way to deal with these matters.

I have great respect for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I hold him in high regard—that is not just a form of words—but he has been too hasty with this decision. It was not necessary to make the decision, and it was the wrong decision. For that reason, I regret that I shall not be able to join him in the Lobby this evening.

5.18 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies). I agree with a substantial number of his points. In fact, he is probably a more severe critic of the Bill than I am. He gave an absolute reason, in his opinion, for voting against it. He referred to a central point, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) also pursued—but which, astonishingly, was not mentioned by the Chief Secretary—which is that the Bill contradicts everything that the Labour party said throughout its period in opposition up to the time of the election, and in the manifesto on which it fought the election.

Labour Back Benchers intervened a number of times in my right hon. Friend's speech. They looked at their bleepers and were obviously told to ask us whether we will commit ourselves to repealing the Bill in five years' time. My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor replied admirably to those interventions. After today's vote, we shall be faced with a fait accompli; in four or five years' time, we shall have an opportunity to see whether our fears were justified. Nevertheless, I disapprove of the way in which the change has been implemented and the remit that has been given to the Bank, and I will be quite content to vote against the Bill today.

The Government have not remotely explained why it took them only four days to eat every word that they pronounced on the subject when they were in opposition. Six months after the general election, we are perhaps getting rather accustomed to that style, as there have been rather more events since then that are in line with their peculiar approach to Government.

Before the new Parliament was assembled, hon. Members had no opportunity to engage in serious debate on the matter with our constituents, with the general public, with financial commentators or with the business world. Then, with a bang and a flash, the Chancellor—in his first few days of dynamic and, as he always says, "modernising" action—announced to the House that he had a totally different policy towards the Bank of England, which he would include in this Bill.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Just like that.

Mr. Clarke: As my hon. Friend says, a bit like that famous magician, "just like that." The Chancellor pulled it out of his hat, and we are now debating the Bill.

If the Labour party, now the Government, were minded to contemplate marching towards the past by granting a greater degree of independence than the Bank has enjoyed in recent years—as the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, we have had experience in the United Kingdom of independent banks—I should prefer the formulation, to which they must now cling, that was occasionally given by both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister when they were in opposition: occasionally hinting that they might contemplate giving independence to the Bank of England after it had established a good track record. As hon. Members have already said in this debate, the Bank had no track record in four days of Labour government.

I do not criticise the Bank. I worked well and constructively with it, and it is not a form of words to say that I had an extremely high regard for Eddie George and his colleagues in the Bank of England and for the advice that they gave me, even if I did not always agree with it. I was never savagely out of step with them in the advice that they gave me. With respect, however, I cannot say that they have an impeccable track record. They certainly do not have a good track record of inflation forecasting.

I was rather dismayed by the extent to which the new Chancellor relied on the fact that the inflation forecast showed the need for instant action. In some of the minutes that the Bank now publishes, the Monetary Policy Committee keeps referring to the Bank's inflation forecast. We must have inflation forecasts. With the greatest respect, however, in recent years, the Bank of England has not been very good at forecasting inflation. The Bank has always overestimated the likely upside inflation risk—which is why the right hon. Member for Llanelli said that it has a deflationary bias. The Bank always fears the worst and reacts accordingly, which is what will cause damage. That is what I fear.

Since the proposals were made, my reservation has been that, over the next few years, we will have a greater deflationary bias in policy. I fear that the Monetary Policy Committee—anxious to prove its anti-inflation credentials—will go in for overkill. If the committee does that and over-insures, to ensure that it establishes a reputation for hitting the inflation target, the price will be

paid by the general public. If the committee merely slows down growth but growth continues, we will sacrifice some of the extra jobs and rising living standards that we might otherwise have enjoyed. If the committee goes in overly for overkill, it will cause perhaps unnecessary damage to the daily lives of those working in the economy.

Some independent banks have a better track record and very high respect in their countries. They have acquired a track record of taking a wider view of affairs. The Bank of England and the new Monetary Policy Committee have not yet satisfied me that the committee, on its track record, is the same type of beast as the Bundesbank, not to mention the Federal Reserve in the United State of America. Quite rightly, those bodies pursue price stability and low inflation, sometimes with targets that have been set for them. But they also take a view of the wider economic picture.

I share what my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor described as the Conservative belief in the virtues of low inflation. I believe that creating in the UK a climate of permanently low inflation is a very desirable objective, and that it would be a big change in our culture. I do not believe, however, that hitting an inflation target should override every other consideration of economic policy in all circumstances and at all times. I tried to be a real-economy Chancellor, and I think that the House should require that the authorities deal with the real economy and take a slightly wider view.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman's views on the matter are well known. Is he telling the House, however, that, among his decisions, he accepts no responsibility for the inflationary pressures that have led the Bank to make its current decisions? Does he really believe that, throughout, he has been right and the Bank has been wrong?

Mr. Clarke: Yes, I do. I think that the Bank is wrong today.

The right hon. Member for Llanelli—who has been a Treasury Minister—was very wise to be cautious in his estimates of where one goes. One will not know, for about 18 months to two years, whether the judgment made on interest rates on a particular day was correct. One may never know the answer, because so many supervening events ensure that one can never guarantee that an inflation target is hit to the exact decimal point.

It would have been a fluke if, before the general election, I had delivered a final inflation figure of 2.4 per cent. I aimed, however, to get it below 2.5 per cent. Although the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) gets very excited about today's 2.8 per cent., I am rather pleased with the inflation record of the past three or four years, combined with falling unemployment and high economic growth. The Liberals, and certainly the Chancellor, would be a little reckless in talking about some mythical belief that the previous Government relaxed control before the general election.

In 18 months to two years, when the first full effects of the Government's decisions are apparent, we shall see how they are getting on in achieving a combination of economic growth, falling unemployment, lower inflation and the generally benign conditions that are required to produce steady growth with low inflation. Neither I nor, I think, any Opposition Member denies that low inflation is an extremely important part—perhaps one of the most important parts—in achieving those conditions, but it is only a part of what should be the aim of macro-economic policy.

It should never be forgotten—it is amazing how frequently it is forgotten in the discussions of commentators—that any democratically elected Government should pursue only one end in economic policy: to attempt to achieve higher living standards, low unemployment levels and improved employment prospects for the general population, whom we serve.

If low inflation is usually helpful in producing that end, low inflation is very important. However, one should not draft a Bill—as this Bill is plainly drafted—stating that, if some momentary circumstance or shock presents a dilemma in which strict pursuit of the inflation target might damage prospects for growth and employment, the independent Bank should be legally obliged to agree that the inflation target takes priority over growth and employment.

At the general election, the Labour party would have had a very animated debate indeed if it had made a statement about handing over that power to the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. All that I recall in the general election, however, was a lot of stuff about going up league tables and the inadequacy of our record on growth and employment—matters that seem to have vanished from the Bill.

My fear is that the Bill is designed to encourage the extremely good Monetary Policy Committee to go for overkill. All the members of the committee are excellent and I have no criticism of any of them, although it is noticeable that several of them are Bank employees. The majority are from the Bank, while the independent people are appointed by the Chancellor, so these people are drawn from a fairly small circle.

The Monetary Policy Committee is already demonstrating that tendency to go for overkill. There have already been five interest rate increases since the general election. The first was ordered by the Chancellor on the day that he made his announcement; the committee announced three successive increases in the following months. It also clearly flagged up the fact that it was going to continue to raise interest rates. I think that that was foolish, and particularly that it drove the value of sterling to a level that is causing considerable damage, which has a marked effect on our exports. Having paused for three months, as it said it would, and having considered the evidence, the committee yesterday raised interest rates by a further 0.25 per cent.

These are difficult decisions. The hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) alleged that after Christmas of last year I had somehow suspended economic judgment and was simply being driven by politics in not following the Bank's advice. I totally refute that. I printed the minutes. I do not believe that putting up interest rates by a quarter per cent. between Christmas and the general election would have cost one vote. *[Interruption.]*

The phrase "Iron Chancellor" was one that I used to claim for myself. I would probably have made the same noises as the present Chancellor, saying that I had raised interest rates to make sure that we avoided boom and bust and that we had stability. The Chancellor has taken all that stuff from speeches of mine made three or four years

[Mr. Clarke]

ago. I would have repeated it and it would have been accepted. However, there was an underlying policy dilemma that has not gone away.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: Yes, as I mentioned the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman believe that, if the Bill had been in force in the first part of the year while he was still Chancellor of the Exchequer, the interest rates would have been the same as they were?

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: No, they would not. We would have fought the election after several interest rate increases. By the time the election came, we would probably have had the four or five that we have had now. My point is that they would have been wrong. Such increases imposed in that way were unnecessary.

The hon. Gentleman looks incredulous. He is obviously a natural supporter of the Bill. He looks incredulous at the idea that I am suggesting that the Bank might be mistaken. "Could the Monetary Policy Committee ever be wrong?" is the hon. Gentleman's reaction. He finds it shocking that I could suggest that. In his eyes, I have no doubt committed the great sin of not only rejecting the advice to raise interest rates but then publishing the fact that I rejected it, publishing the advice and giving my reasons for doing so. Those reasons were economic. That was my acknowledgement of accountability to the House and a resistance of short-term political pressures.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I will give way in a moment, but I must explain the dilemma. It is possible that these decisions are debatable; it is also possible that the eight wise men on the Monetary Policy Committee are getting it wrong, could get it wrong in future and should not be allowed carte blanche.

At the moment we have a most uneven recovery. The service sector is strong and is the main contributor to the high levels of growth which are believed to be unsustainable. We have a very strong and somewhat unstable level of sterling, which is squeezing exports. There is a very low level of growth in manufacturing.

The dilemma is to decide the extent to which one has regard to the deflationary effect of the strong value of sterling, the extent to which one has regard to the weak performance of manufacturing, and the extent to which overall stability is threatened by the strong growth of the service sector. This is not the time to have a full debate on the matter, but it is not obvious to me that there were underlying inflationary pressures when the new Government took over which required such a rapid increase. There is no resemblance between the current data and situation and the situation in the later 1980s when we last had boom and bust.

Unemployment is falling, but the fall is slowing. There are some skill shortages, but the decline in unemployment is slowing. That has not fed through into wage inflation, the old British curse. Earnings are now rising by 4.5 per cent., which would have been unimaginable in the late 1980s—4.5 per cent. over an underlying inflation rate of 2.8 per cent. The retail price index, which usually determines earnings, has been driven up by the Government's interest rate increases and the taxes that they have imposed. There was a 3.75 per cent. earnings increase in 1996. This is not driving inflationary pressure. The figures for factory gate prices produced yesterday are astonishingly low. I mentioned the RPI—food prices are almost static, and shop prices are not rising significantly within the RPI.

Consumer spending has grown strongly by 5 per cent., but it has not shown any signs of accelerating this year. In fact, last month, it seemed to drop a little. That is against the background of the windfalls from the building societies. People feared what would happen when all that money flooded into the economy. My view was that the windfalls were only a one-off—if we acted to deal with the windfall spending, in 18 months' time we would find that the windfalls had gone and the action that we had taken meant our missing the target. In reality, only a quarter of the windfalls appear to be being spent, while most are being saved. The savings ratio in this country is satisfactorily high compared with what it was.

Everyone, even the Monetary Policy Committee, expects the growth in the economy to slow down next year. I do not know of one commentator who does not think that the present high level of growth will slow next year. If the committee keeps piling on interest rate increases until it sees the slow-down starting, it will face the classic problem of monetary policy: one fires the shot from the cannon, but it takes 18 months to two years before one knows where it lands and what one has hit. If we keep raising interest rates in an economy that is on the point of starting to slow down, it will slow down much faster than expected.

Two things seem to dominate the Monetary Policy Committee's minutes—which, incidentally, are anonymous, unlike the ones that I used to produce. First, the committee is obsessed with its forecasts. The committee opted for one of the increases because, had it not done so, the Bank's forecast would have shown inflation above 2.5 per cent. two years on, so it thought that it had better build in an interest rate increase to make the forecast that it had printed compatible with the target. I have already commented on the value of the forecasts.

Secondly, the most serious thing that seems to trouble the committee is that the present rate of growth is unsustainable, despite the fact that everyone believes that it will slow down. The present rate of growth of 4 per cent. per annum is not sustainable, but we are taking a terribly pessimistic view of sustainable annual rates of growth. It has only just touched 4 per cent. In the boom of the 1980s, it was above 4 per cent. for most of four years. I agree that that was before disaster occurred, but let us not take action now, as soon as growth touches 4 per cent., to head off a feared future disaster when everyone knows that the rate will not be maintained.

The Government are taking the most ridiculously pessimistic view of trend growth in this country. I do not know what trend growth is—no one does, but we have to take our best stab at it. The Government have revised the rate down from my reckless 2.5 per cent. to a more cautious 2.25 per cent., the average of what the British economy has achieved for the past 40 years. What an ambitious, modernising Government! What league tables we will soar up saying that trend growth is 2.25 per cent.!

It is because the Government do not approve of all our supply-side changes. They are probably anticipating the social chapter, the minimum wage and the trade union laws which will take us back to the trend rates of growth that this country used to enjoy. They have let loose a monetary committee that may ensure that we achieve disappointing results. The cost will fall on the public we serve, who were not given the faintest warning of the measure at any point in the election campaign.

On accountability and openness, I share many of the views that have been expressed. The right hon. Member for Llanelli attacked the Government's views eloquently, asking why we should be trusted with anything if we are not trusted with monetary policy. What we now call monetary policy has developed only since Bretton Woods, only since Nigel Lawson was Chancellor has it been operated as it is now, and we have a pretty shocking record on running it.

Of course there is a danger of short-term political pressures taking over. I am against short-term, populist pressures operating on monetary policy. That is why I published minutes. As Chancellor, I was accountable to the House, but I do not remember the House having any effect on interest rate decisions before they were taken. Even after decisions, most hon. Members were so cautious about giving their views that I was not put under too much pressure. Of course, if it all goes wrong and there is hyper-inflation, the Chancellor is rightly hammered by the House of Commons.

I thought that the best way to avoid political pressure was to print the advice given to the Government month by month, and my response as Chancellor. That had previously been a state secret. I protected my other officials by not naming them. Junior Ministers enjoyed similar protection, although I do not think that they would have minded if we had given their individual views. I allowed them to disagree with me at the meetings. We produced genuine minutes of genuine meetings for the Select Committee and the Opposition to have fun with.

We now have a new attempt to ensure openness. I should be cautious about allowing the Select Committee to vet all appointments. I do not like the American system. A similar system here might be subject to political influence. However, the Select Committee should demand proper openness.

The monetary committee produces anonymous minutes. The opinion of the Governor of the Bank of England cannot be identified from the minutes any more. I do not know whether he allows his colleagues at the Bank to express openly at the meeting views that contradict his. They tended to have a more collegiate approach when I was at the Treasury. I think that there is a pretty safe batch of votes there.

I shall not believe the new minutes—just as people, rightly, would not believe my minutes—until there is evidence of some division. So far, the monetary committee has been unanimous. It may not have been unanimous on the most recent increase, which was a little dodgy.

In America, where the Federal Reserve produces minutes, the house view tends to prevail. It is a bit like a political party subject to a whip. The members have a frank discussion, but when they face the outside world they endorse unanimously the opinion that the leader—in this case the Governor of the Bank—has proclaimed. I look forward to seeing evidence of votes. I want to know which members of the committee disagreed and why the rest of the committee overruled them. Until we have such minutes, the openness that is talked about will be inadequate. It is less open than the system before the election under the Conservative Government.

Great claims are being made for the Bill that will not be borne out. If independence was to be contemplated, it should not have been done as it has been. The new system was rushed and ill thought through. The conditions that have been created do not reasonably resemble anything that Labour talked about at the general election. The Government will take us down the league tables of growth, and they could cause rising unemployment.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): I am thoroughly enjoying the right hon. and learned Gentleman's speech and I agree with most of it. However, I do not understand the consistency of being against an independent bank in the United Kingdom but in favour of control by an independent bank in Europe.

Mr. Clarke: Making a European central bank politically accountable internationally would probably require an international council of Ministers, which, as the French wish, would produce more political intervention. If there is a European central bank and if we participate, I should prefer us to build on the point that I was making. Accountability to Parliament did not previously involve the House of Commons holding the Chancellor to account the day after an interest rate increase. I cannot remember that happening. Accountability for monetary decisions depends on openness and transparency.

There is a great deal to be decided about the European central bank. It has to determine its monetary targets and its inflation target if it wants one. It has to decide how it will proceed. There is no reason why Europeans should be more hesitant than Americans in demanding proper minutes and that individual governors should proclaim their opinions. There must be proper openness in their discussions. The Treasury Select Committee should be no less hesitant about interviewing the governor and members of the executive committee of a European bank than it is about the Bank of England at the moment, particularly if the Governor of the Bank of England is one of the members. That is how the Bundesbank operates. The members of the board are the heads of the state banks of the various Länder. They offer themselves to account when they go back home.

That all has to be worked on. I am discussing the Bill. It does not modernise procedures. It is not a considered step on Bank of England independence. It does not create a new anti-inflationary climate. It is the result of four days of dynamic action and an attempt by the Chancellor to be a macho new reforming Chancellor. We have been placed in the hands of a monetary committee that is showing every sign of overkill in pursuing its target. The Bill should be rejected because it is a gimmick, not a worthwhile addition to the country's armoury of economic powers to deal with its problems.

5.45 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): The shadow Chancellor's speech was rather ambiguous and uncertain. I was surprised when he ended up recommending that his party vote against the Bill. The right hon. and learned

[Mr. Giles Radice]

Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the former Chancellor, made a better fist of putting the case against the Bill, although I should like to take him up on a couple of points.

I congratulate the Government on their good sense and courage in giving the Bank of England operational responsibility for setting interest rates. It was the right thing to do and they were right to do it straight away.

The Treasury and Civil Service Committee, of which I was a member, reported on the issue in December 1993. That report helped to lay the groundwork for the Government's policy. We recommended giving operational independence to the Bank. The Chancellor has generously recognised our work.

We started with open minds. Having taken evidence from many sources and examined experience overseas, we were persuaded by the arguments for independence. There was a Conservative majority on the Select Committee. The conclusion was supported by all but one of the Labour members—the one who is in front of me at the moment—and by the Liberal Democrat member. Our model has now been accepted by the Government.

Lord Lawson put strongly to us the key argument that Bank independence enhanced the credibility of monetary policy. Whatever the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe may say, nobody—least of all the markets—trusts politicians to set interest rates, particularly in the run-up to an election. The Chief Secretary also pointed that out to the Select Committee.

Who is to say that the people are wrong, from the track record? When Roy Jenkins was Chancellor, in the run-up to the 1970 election—which the Labour Government lost—he took a tough line. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, a number of whose policies—particularly those on Europe—I admire, ran a relatively tight ship for two years, recovering from his rather poor inheritance as Chancellor. But in the run-up to the election, he relaxed public spending. He should have increased interest rates at the beginning of 1997, as I said during the Budget debate at the time, so I am not being wise after the event.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend has repeated the well-rehearsed point that politicians cannot be trusted with interest rates. Will he explain, therefore, the intellectual rationale for trusting politicians with the other levers of monetary policy—fiscal policy and so on?

Mr. Radice: It is not a purely intellectual argument, but one about practice. One has only to look at the record. That is why so many countries have been giving banks operational independence in respect of monetary policy.

Mr. Mitchell: It is in fashion.

Mr. Radice: It is not a question of fashion, but rather the result of practical experience. If my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) will settle down for a moment, I shall give him part of the argument.

Operational independence can help to create a virtuous circle. Such independence enhances credibility, making it more likely that inflation targets will be achieved as the behaviour of the main players is influenced. In time, that enhanced credibility allows lower interest rates. As Lord Lawson said,

> "If monetary policy remains in the hands of politicians, the markets demand an interest rate premium."

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe knows that very well. The Select Committee looked into the matter and found that countries with independent central banks had a better inflation record than those without.

A serious counter-argument has been put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, who questioned whether operational independence would lead to a more deflationary policy. In other words, would it lead to overkill? Some safeguards against this have been written into the Bill. For example, reasons have to be given if the inflation target is overshot or if there is an undershoot—in other words, if inflation is too low. If there is overkill, the Monetary Policy Committee has to inform the Chancellor why. That was not mentioned by the former Chancellor—in my opinion, unfairly, as it is written into the Bill.

The primary role of the Monetary Policy Committee is to bear down on inflation, but the committee must also support the Government's economic policy, including the objectives of higher and stable levels of growth and employment, so it cannot ignore those factors. As I have said, the greater the credibility of monetary policy, the lower interest rates can be, increasing the stability of the system and producing a good environment for growth and employment. That is the basic rationale for the system.

The model presented to us in the Bill also increases the openness of decision making. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe was gracious enough to admit that there is no golden age of accountability to which we can refer back. Under the old system there was a formal ability to question the Chancellor about interest rates, but he was not very forthcoming in replying to it. I remember Lord Lawson telling us:

> "When I want to put up interest rates I put them up. When I want to bring them down, I bring them down."

That was a perfectly valid constitutional position, but it does not tell the House very much about the reasons behind the policy. If Chancellors thought they could get away with saying that, they did so.

I accept that, acting on a suggestion from the Select Committee, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe published the minutes—all credit to him for that. They were sometimes quite revealing, but sometimes they were not. One had the impression that there may have been a meeting beforehand between officials from the two bodies and that some of the conflict did not come out into the open. It is fair to say that decision making remained fairly opaque.

Under the new system, there is increased openness. First, the Chancellor sets inflation rates and has to answer to the House and the Select Committee. Secondly, there is a full publication of minutes and votes. Therefore, any differences and divisions will be clear. The Select Committee will certainly insist on that. Thirdly, the non-executive members of the reconstituted court of the Bank will review the performance of the Bank and report to Parliament. That will be one opportunity for Parliament to examine the Bank's performance on monetary policy. Lastly, the Select Committee will have an enhanced role.

The Select Committee has been given a greater role than in the past. Although we have asked the Governor of the Bank of England to give evidence previously, in future

it will be done on a very different scale. We are committed to at least two dedicated sessions on the four inflation reports each year, and there could well be as many as four. I can announce to the House that the next one will be when the Governor and the members of the Monetary Policy Committee give evidence on 27 November. If there is division, we shall want to question representatives of the Monetary Policy Committee to find out the reasons for any differences and so get them out into the open. I agree that the best way to achieve an accountable system is to have an open system.

We shall take evidence on the inflation target from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, who is responsible for setting it, and the Governor, who is responsible for implementing it. We will do that every year. If there is an open letter from the Governor to the Chancellor on the reasons for the divergence of inflation from its target, we shall take evidence from the Chancellor and the Governor. If the Chancellor uses his power to override the Bank, we shall take evidence from him. We shall also take evidence from the non-executive members of the court on their assessment of the Bank and the Monetary Policy Committee. So the Select Committee will have an enhanced role and a much greater programme of hearings and reports to the House on the performance of the Monetary Policy Committee.

In a sense, the Select Committee is also on trial. *[Interruption.]* Although my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby wants me to be a terrorist, I shall not, even for him. However, we shall have to ask sustained and serious questions about the performance of the Monetary Policy Committee. There are very many able people on the Select Committee, and they will do that most effectively.

We have also said in our report on accountability that there should be confirmatory hearings. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe has some reservations, but we believe that such hearings would be good for the independence of the Monetary Policy Committee and strengthen the relationship between the Bank and Parliament. Of course, when somebody is appointed, we can have a hearing and issue a report to the House on that person's suitability. The fact that we can and shall do it—even without formal powers being written into the Bill—could influence the Chancellor were he thinking of putting his granny or whoever on to the Monetary Policy Committee. So we hope the Select Committee will contribute to some extent, but it would be much better if formal powers could be written into the Bill.

Ms Abbott: Is it right for my hon. Friend to talk about the Chancellor's granny in such disparaging terms? For all we know, she might be an expert on monetary policy.

Mr. Radice: However good she is, it would be ill advised to put relatives on the Monetary Policy Committee.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: On a more serious point, I am not concerned about the Chancellor's granny, but I may be leaping in where the Chief Secretary feared to tread. Everybody seems to be very keen on confirmatory hearings. Is the idea that the Treasury Select Committee will cross-examine all the aspirants on their views on monetary policy? Will it award them marks them out of 10 in relation to their competence? Will it insist on more or fewer strict monetarists? Will it want some "inflation is dead" men? We could end up with a peculiar Monetary Policy Committee if the Select Committee decided to approve people with whose views it happened to agree.

Mr. Radice: It is easy to poke fun at the idea, but we shall look at the professional competence of the people concerned. We have good advisers and our own views. It will not be a question of putting monetarists or Keynesians on the committee, because we do not actually appoint members of the committee. That is a decision for the Chancellor. We will be able to make reports to the House on those appointed or nominated by the Chancellor and, in some instances, we may decide that they are not professionally up to the job. We may be wrong, but the House can take account of our view and dismiss it if it wants.

Confirmatory hearings are a sensible approach, and the House should consider them seriously. We do not intend to introduce an American "advise and consent" system, and we would not delve into the sex life or tax position of Monetary Policy Committee nominees. We will examine their professional qualifications to do the job. I hope that the Government and the Modernisation Committee will consider the proposal with an open mind.

My last point concerns the terms of office of the members of the Monetary Policy Committee. At the moment, the members—apart from Governor and Deputy Governor—will serve for only three years. It could be argued that that will give the Chancellor undue political influence over those members. Perhaps the terms should be longer than three years, and I hope that the Chief Secretary will consider that suggestion. Appointments to the court have also been reduced from a four-year to a three-year term. What is the rationale behind that change?

I strongly support the Bill, because it will help to create monetary stability. I believe that is important, because I have lived through the 1970s, 1980s and the early 1990s. It will also help to create conditions for non-inflationary growth and will enhance the openness and accountability of monetary policy.

6.2 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I am glad to be called at last to speak in this debate, not least because there is more united support from the Liberal Democrats for the Bill than from Labour or Conservative Members. The latter appear to be somewhat confused and incoherent on the matter.

The proposals in the Bill were not contained in the Labour party manifesto, although they were clearly spelled out in the Liberal Democrat manifesto and the paper that we published before that. During the election, the subject came up in numerous debates between the then Chancellor, the then shadow Chancellor and myself, but the current Chancellor gave no indication that he intended to introduce such a Bill. I can only conclude only that he must have been persuaded by the force of the arguments. However he arrived at his decision, the Liberal Democrats are keen to support it.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I am loth to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's train of thought, but the issue of the contents

[Mrs. Helen Liddell]

of the Labour party manifesto keeps being raised. I am sure that he has read the manifesto in some detail, but he may care to turn to page 13, which states:

"We will reform the Bank of England to ensure that decision-making on monetary policy is more effective, open, accountable and free from short-term political manipulation."

What is his problem?

Mr. Bruce: The Economic Secretary knows that that is not a clear statement of operational independence, which is a clear policy that has been well discussed. Labour politicians, when in opposition, did not make their support for it clear. However, that is history. The Government's decision is welcome and I am happy to support it. Indeed, much of the detail is along the lines that we advocated. We would have preferred a more radical review of the structure of the bank, and we proposed that its name be changed to the United Kingdom reserve bank, with full statutory regional representation on the board of management or the court. Nevertheless, the Government have gone a long way towards our proposals.

I intend to concentrate my remarks on the part of the Bill relating to monetary policy. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) will be able to speak later on the regulatory aspects of the Bill.

The proposals will bring the United Kingdom into line with almost every other major developed economy. I find it strange that we have heard such vehement opposition from hon. Members on both sides of the House to what has increasingly become recognised as good practice in the day-to-day management of monetary policy. The right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) made a ludicrous leap from the devolution of the day-to-day management of interest rates to the total management of economic policy. The change will enable the Government to get on with the job for which they are supposed to take responsibility—fundamental policy decisions on the economy—instead of being diverted by short-term arguments about interest rates.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was unable to restrain himself from justifying the position of the Conservatives in government and his own track record. His argument appeared to be, "I am right and other people are wrong. You should be glad that I had the opportunity to take those decisions, because I was right."

As the right hon. and learned Gentleman pointed out, the time lag is 18 months and we have not yet seen the full impact of his decisions, never mind those of the present Government. However, if I am not mistaken, it was about 18 months ago that he overruled the Bank of England's determination to put up interest rates—and we now have an inflationary pressure whose importance he downgrades, but which most commentators regard as real and requiring action. He is entitled to his opinion, but I am not sure that he is entitled to such uncompromising self-confidence.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: We have 12 months in which my approach may prove to be wrong, although everybody forecast that inflation would fall in the second half of this year. My point was about overkill and excessively deflationary policies. My argument was that five increases of 0.25 per cent. each justify my suspicion that the Government have a deflationary policy. I might have decided on a couple of increases myself under the old arrangements, but I would not have reached 7.25 per cent. The Bank is behaving in precisely the way that we warned it would.

Mr. Bruce: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is entitled to his opinion. He has declared it robustly and the next 18 months may test it out. He also said in his speech, and has just repeated it, that he might have made adjustments earlier. Had he done so, the situation might have been different now. [HON. MEMBERS: "He did not say that."] Yes, he did.

Mr. Lilley: My right hon. and learned Friend said that the committee might have made adjustments earlier, but that it would have been wrong to do so.

Mr. Bruce: That is a categorical statement about a matter of opinion, and that is the difficulty that arises in such cases. Such arguments are ultimately fruitless, because in reality someone has to make an objective economic decision. If a Chancellor appoints an independent committee to make the decision and then overrules it on the grounds that he knows best, he is effectively deciding that political, rather than economic, considerations will determine the management of monetary policy.

Our experience over the years has been fairly bitter and, more often than not, we have been wrong rather than right. We can reflect on the fact that, on the day that the Chancellor announced his decision, long-term interest rates went down. Whatever the short-term considerations, the ultimate objective must be the real gains that are to be obtained from ensuring stable, low inflation, low long-term interest rates and a degree of convergence between our interest rates and those of parallel economies operating similar forms of operationally independent central banks. That ultimately is a prize with real benefits for mortgage payers, businesses and everybody who wants stability in economic management.

I hope—at the moment it is only a hope—that the Conservative party will end its opposition to the proposal. I repeat what I said to the shadow Chancellor. I find it extraordinary that he can claim that the Chancellor is giving away his most important power—it is a questionable argument, but those were his words—while suggesting that he could not make up his mind whether or not the Conservatives would reverse the decision if they ever regained power. If what he said is true, he ought to commit his party to reversing the Chancellor's decision. The fact that he cannot and will not suggests that it is an argument for today, rather than a substantive belief. The shadow Chancellor then spelled out how one could make the Bank more independent—presumably by improving the Bill to make it acceptable to the Conservatives, and therefore not reversible.

In our view, it would be helpful to have political consensus on this sooner rather than later. The Conservative party's position may not be a worry at the moment because nobody seriously expects it to be in government for a long time. But if the Conservatives are serious in their pretensions to regain power, people in business will want to know whether they would wish to reverse the policy. They cannot leave it in limbo for ever.

If they can be so definite about apparently never joining a single currency, it seems odd that they are not clear where they stand on this matter.

This is the right Bill and it should command wide support. I do not believe that people will rush into the streets demanding that politicians be given the right to interfere once again in the short-term setting of interest rates. If one looks at the American example, I hear no clamour that Bill Clinton should take over control of interest rates from Alan Greenspan. I am not sure whether anyone—even the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)—would replace Eddie George with the shadow Chancellor, although, essentially, that is what the hon. Lady is arguing for.

Once the system is in place, it will be recognised as a sensible and practical way of making short-term decisions, allowing the Government to concentrate on the things that shape the long-term economy, which clearly include the fiscal stance and policies for promoting growth and investment. If we achieve stable low inflation, the climate for investment will be dramatically improved in the long term. People can start to assess risks on a much narrower basis, and clearly that will encourage a great many more investment prospects which currently fall by the wayside because of the need to allow for unpredictable fluctuations in exchange and interest rates.

A sensible decision is being opposed by the Conservative party, which nevertheless has among its number a former Chancellor who is most enthusiastic about the policy—Nigel Lawson. The right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) intervened on the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe and got him middle stump by asking for his view on an independent central bank for the United Kingdom as compared with a European central bank. It is neither consistent nor logical to oppose the principle of an operationally independent bank for the United Kingdom while being in favour of a single currency reinforced by a central European bank. He knows that to be the case, and was able to argue only on the detail.

I had many debates with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe when he was Chancellor, and I always respected his style and his record, in spite of our differences on the details. Clearly he is proud of his record, and he has some reason to be proud. However, he can get carried away by some of his press releases—he certainly did at the end of the last Parliament. He seems to take the view that there was a great deal of entertainment in the Ken and Eddie show, and he took pleasure in being right, on his terms, more often than Eddie. The funny thing is that, when one talks to Eddie, he sees it rather differently in terms of who was right and who was wrong. He maintains, as the former Chancellor would, that the jury is still out on the final result.

In spite of his assertions to the contrary, many commentators—I include myself among them—take the view that the conduct of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe before the election underlined the case for an operationally independent bank. I do not believe him when he says that the rate set in the six-month run-up to the election was not influenced by political considerations. He may have taken a different view, but others in the Cabinet at the time definitely thought that the Conservatives could do without interest rate rises in the run-up to the election. The sooner the Conservative party can accept the principle of the policy, the better. The Conservative party will have no credibility if it opposes the policy, and it is not prepared to say whether it will endorse the policy or leave it uncertain.

There are a number of issues which we can debate in more detail in Committee, but I should like to follow the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), who referred to some of the Treasury Committee's recommendations which bear further consideration.

The terms of appointment of the members of the Monetary Policy Committee are important and, having discussed the matter with people inside and outside the banking fraternity, I can say that there is a general recognition that three years is rather short, on two grounds. First, if one is trying to determine an inflation target and a policy to hit that target with a lag time of two years, one does not have an opportunity to produce a significant track record in three years. It takes longer than that, and that is fundamental to the argument.

Second, and less importantly, is the freedom from apparent political pressure. I am not accusing the Chancellor of seeking directly to intervene on or influence the independence of the monetary committee, and I am not convinced that the people to be appointed would be susceptible to pressure. But the perception that they could be put under pressure cannot be removed in the case of a three-year appointment which requires their reappointment this side of a general election.

Perhaps the period could be extended to five years—not the 10 or 15 years which apply in other countries—which would give them long enough to establish a track record and to depend for their reappointment on the next Government and the next Parliament, not the current ones. Those are persuasive arguments. If the Government genuinely believe that their claim to have an open mind is valid, I hope that they will be persuaded to reconsider the terms of appointment and extend them to take that into account.

I wish to refer also to confirmatory hearings. The Government have indicated that they are not against them in principle, but the Chief Secretary—in his evidence to the Select Committee—basically said that, although he had an open mind, he would resist all amendments. He argued on the grounds of the time scale and the fact that this would be a radical departure that had implications for other appointments. That is why the hon. Member for North Durham is suggesting that the Modernisation Committee should look into that matter.

I urge the Government to approach the matter the other way round. If we are to move in that direction—many feel that that is a logical area for Select Committees in general to be involved in—we have to start somewhere. I am suspicious of the argument that we should either introduce it across the board or not at all, because I know where that would lead:it would lead to our not introducing it at all.

We should start somewhere, perhaps providing a model that could be extended elsewhere. That would be a good constraint from the Government's point of view: a Select Committee that knew that it would be judged to determine whether its use was to be extended would be constrained in its actions by that consideration. I hope that the Government will consider that a reasonable starting point that could be extended if the project was a success and not repeated if it was not. If they do not, I fear that we may never get into that slightly more innovative mode.

[Mr. Bruce]

I ask the Government to follow the spirit of their own terms and allow their open-mindedness to develop into real, practical activity that could help to strengthen the role and respect of Select Committees and to test the Government's good faith. I am not challenging their good faith, but it must be borne into practical action.

Everybody is aware that the Governor's term of appointment is due for review in the near future. I want to put it on record that, regardless of the differences of view that he has had with a variety of people, he has conducted himself in recent years with great credibility and integrity. The Government would do well, considering that this is a new departure, to take an early decision to confirm his reappointment. If this exercise is to be a success, it is pretty important for the Bank to know in whose hands its new role is to be developed.

The Government have set themselves the task of preparing the country for membership of a single currency, even if, regrettably, they have effectively ruled out the possibility of an early decision in this Parliament—although I suspect that they may yet have to return to that. The Bank is likely to have some years of operational independence before the decision is finally made to become part of the European central bank, so perhaps its track record in those years will pave the way.

The Conservative party has put itself in a remarkable position, given its track record and former contacts and support: on all the central issues, it is substantially on the wrong side of the debate with the business community, which needs at least some suggestion of a practical political focus for decision making that takes account of what is really happening.

In the real world, politicians do not have the power they often claim to manipulate the economy as some interventionists would wish, but they can create a climate of stability and allow business to thrive. In the European environment, there is a clear determination to set up a strong single currency, pursuing policies of monetary and fiscal rectitude to the benefit of all the economies of the European Union.

There is no apparent role for a United Kingdom that is not part of that, and the Conservative party has not articulated any coherent possible role in that circumstance. If it cannot do that, it can hardly be surprised that it cannot convince the captains of industry and the decision makers in business that what it has to say is relevant to the 21st century.

The Government have made a commitment in principle to the single currency that accords with practical reality, and have introduced a Bill that accords with good common sense and should lay the foundations for stable low inflation and a climate of good investment. We commend it, and will support it.

6.24 pm

Mr. Mike Wood (Batley and Spen): As the first Labour Member for Batley and Spen and someone who has lived there since 1976, I cannot believe that any hon. Member is unaware of my constituency's precise location, but perhaps for the record I should fix its geographical location at the very heart of West Yorkshire, with a northern boundary that is co-terminous with both Bradford and Leeds.

My constituency is a mix of keenly independent-minded towns that pay no deference whatever to their more powerful northern neighbours, interspersed with attractive countryside that still shows the scars of an industrial past. Batley made its name and its wealth in the last century as the centre of the heavy woollen industry and from the manufacture of a specialist product called shoddy: the bringing together of used rags and woollen cloth to produce quality overcoats and carpets—an early example of recycling that brought an influx of workers from Ireland and, later, from the Indian sub-continent. Both those communities are now settled and form the core of the town's diverse and industrious population.

The Spen valley is the centre of the wire-drawing industry—a process whereby metal rods are transformed into rolls of wire—and until recently was a major producer of asbestos products, resulting in much long-term illness and death for workers and their families.

The last of our many pits, Gomersal, closed in the 1970s, more than 15 years before my immediate predecessor achieved passing fame by defending certain groups of miners during the Conservative Government's ill-conceived and malicious assault on one of the most efficient industries in the world. As a direct result of that disastrous policy, applications have been made in my area for opencast mining development, with all its attendant environmental and health problems.

Mrs. Peacock held strong views on issues such as law and order and abortion, and liked to be thought of as an independent-minded Yorkshire woman. I wish her the peaceful and thoughtful retirement that she deserves.

Over the years, we have suffered more than most at the hands of the boundary commission. The first Labour Member for Batley and Morley, Ben Turner, travelled at his own expense and by a circuitous route to Moscow in the early days of the Soviet Union. Granted an interview with Lenin, he informed the great man that he appreciated the scale of his problems but could not condone his methods. In the House he was hardly less forthright, and was a consistent advocate of a minimum wage.

A contemporary of Ben Turner's was Tom Myers, the first Labour Member for Spen Valley. Tom for a short while replaced Sir John Simon, and his work is recognised in the name of my office premises in Cleckheaton: Tom Myers house. Constituents still call occasionally and ask to see Tom—or, to be more exact, they think that I am Tom. Recently the Co-op bank demanded his endorsement on a cheque and took a fair time to accept as sufficient justification for his absence the fact that he had been dead for 50 years.

No introduction to my constituency would be complete without mention of and tribute to Dr. Broughton, who, after working as a Batley general practitioner, served as its Member of Parliament, to equally good effect, for more than 30 years. It was a tragedy not only for him but for his country that, while he was on his death-bed, the Callaghan Government fell for the want of the single vote that he would loyally have provided had his illness allowed.

Mine is a constituency with many fine museums, some of national note, and a rugby league side in Batley Bulldogs that would also have national standing if its effort received more ample reward and, indeed, more financial backing.

We are steeped in history, as reference to one short period will show. Dr. Joseph Priestley, one of this country's foremost scientific minds, was born in Birstall

and spent his formative years in the area. He is noted for his discovery and isolation of oxygen—not, as so many school essays are supposed to claim, its invention. As a minister of religion he held radical views that even now would not endear him to the establishment, or even to many Labour party selection meetings. As an open supporter of both the American and French revolutions, he was a target of Government agents. To the shame of this country, a great reforming mind was lost to America.

Government agents also infiltrated and eventually undermined the working-class movement centred on the Spen valley that became known as the rise of the luddites. They were highly skilled and literate workers responsible for putting a fine quality hand finish on local woollen cloth. The machinery that threatened their jobs also threatened their families. That, combined with employers whose idea of industrial relations involved threats to ride up to their saddle girths in luddite blood, precipitated a violent conflict.

While mortally wounded in a local hostelry, a youth called Booth was tortured to obtain the name of the luddite leader. The vicar of Liversedge, the Rev. Hammond Roberson, an active supporter of local industrialists, in an effort to obtain the confession, assured the lad that he could keep a secret. With his last gasp, Booth assured the cleric that he could, too, and he took the luddite leader's name to his grave.

Hammond Roberson was a dinner companion of a local curate, the Rev. Patrick Brontë who, a year after the public hanging of the Spen valley luddites at York, brought his new bride to live at Hightown. It was there that Charlotte's sisters Emily and Anne were born. It was in the Spen valley that the famous novelists received their education.

I do not expect the privilege of serving the area for as long as Dr. Broughton or the opportunity to confront and contradict world leaders as did Ben Turner, but I am confident that in this Parliament, as part of this Labour Government, I shall see the advent of Turner's long-sought minimum wage. I will have the opportunity to vote for regulations to stop further environmental destruction by opencast mining, and I will be part of the process that will introduce the long overdue ban of the import and use of asbestos.

Today, we debate the Bank of England Bill, which has been headlined as the Bill that will allow the Bank of England the freedom to set interest rates—not an idea that I welcome wildly. Of course, it contains far more: new faces and new freedoms balanced by new responsibilities and accountability, as one would expect from a Government determined to position this country to meet the challenges and take the opportunities that the new millennium will bring. As such, it has much to recommend it to my constituents and to people throughout Britain. I am proud to be able to lend my support to the Bill today.

6.31 pm

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): It gives me great pleasure to be the first to congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood) on his excellent maiden speech, to which the House listened with close attention and much pleasure. He spoke in a most interesting way about his constituency and some of its famous figures of the past. He also paid tribute to his predecessor, Elizabeth Peacock, who is a great friend of mine. The only point on which I would venture to disagree with him was his suggestion that she might be looking forward to a quiet retirement. Knowing her as I do, and admiring her tremendous rigour and the bonny way in which she fought for her constituency and, in particular, for her miners, I am sure that quietness is the last thing she has in mind and that she will continue to play an active role in public life. We hope to hear from the hon. Gentleman often. From his closing remarks, it is obvious that he is a man of idealism, and will make a great contribution to our discussions.

Right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have expressed some astonishment that the introduction of independent monetary control by the Bank of England was announced four days after the general election without having been in the Labour party's manifesto. Even *The Guardian* of 7 May said that there was no democratic legitimacy for the proposal. One wonders why this dramatic announcement, now encoded in a Bill, should have been made with such a roll of drums so soon after polling day and before the House of Commons reassembled. There are four main reasons.

The first was explained by Lord Healey in his usual helpful way, when he said that the idea of an independent central bank was a gimmick to be used as an apologia by failed Chancellors to shuffle off their failures on to the Bank of England. As has been pointed out, there have already been five increases in interest rates since polling day. Apart from the introduction of university charges, they are the most unpopular things that the new Labour Government have done.

One can see that it is in the short term politically helpful to the Government to be able to say that it is the responsibility of other people. I doubt whether that will work for them, because in my constituency surgery on Saturday, nearly half the people who came to see me with their personal problems mentioned higher interest rates on their mortgages as a particular blow. None of them blamed it on the Bank of England. None seemed to have got the message. They seemed to feel that it was the responsibility of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Perhaps every effort will be made by the spin doctors as time goes on to prove that those matters are no longer the responsibility of the Government.

The second reason for the change is that every Labour Government have produced a sterling crisis leading to the devaluation of the pound: 1931, 1949, 1967 and 1976. By surrendering control over monetary policy, the Chancellor no doubt hopes that, in the next crisis, the independence of the Bank of England will provide him with an alibi.

Thirdly, the Chancellor and his senior colleagues must hope that the change will provide him with a defence against his Back Benchers, who will not always be as supine and cringing in their parliamentary behaviour as they have been so far. When things start to go wrong on the economic front, as undoubtedly they will in the nature of things, and when unemployment starts rising, as undoubtedly it will at some point in the cycle, I hope that Labour Back Benchers will not allow themselves to be bought off with the excuse that the measures causing unemployment are not in the control of the Government but are the responsibility of the hard-hearted people on the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England.

[Sir Peter Tapsell]

The fourth, and in many ways most important, reason for the change is to prepare the way for Britain to enter a single European currency managed by a European central bank that will be wholly independent of any form of democratic control. When one tells people—even sophisticated people in the City of London and in business—that the proposed European central bank will be subject to no democratic control or influence, they express disbelief.

As some hon. Members were not here in the previous Parliament during our interminable discussions of the Maastricht treaty, it might be useful if I read out the relevant extract of article 7, which explains the exact position of the proposed European central bank. Article 7 states, in part:

"neither the ECB, nor a national central bank, nor any member of their decision-making bodies shall seek or take instructions . . . from any government of a Member State or from any other body . . . The governments of the Member States undertake to respect this principle and not to seek to influence the members of the decision-making bodies of the ECB or of the national central banks in the performance of their tasks."

That is what the Maastricht treaty imposes upon us. So much, therefore, for accountability and transparency.

Some people have suggested that, as long as the minutes of the European central bank are published and we know who has taken the decisions, there is accountability. I see that the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) wants to intervene. If he enters the House, it will be easier for me to give way and I shall most certainly do so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. Will the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) be seated? He should not address the Chamber from those Benches, as they are not part of the House.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I understand, but I shall be happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman now that he is in the House, if you will permit me to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green was outwith the precincts of the Chamber, so the hon. Member should carry on with his speech.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I bow to that judgment, which has put me, after 38 years, into a unique position of experience in these matters. I see that the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green is rising again and, as it is presumably on a different point, I shall be happy to give way to him.

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): Well, it is from a different position and I must apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You talked about accountability and transparency, but the bit of the Maastricht treaty that you read out concerned independence, not accountability or transparency, which is elsewhere in the treaty. You would do well to read that out to us.

Sir Peter Tapsell: The occupant of the Chair is being held responsible for a great many things for which I do not think he is responsible. I shall try to answer that intervention within the rules of order.

If we have a European central bank, it will be against the law to seek to influence or bring pressure to bear on it. As the Maastricht treaty explains, one can be heavily fined for attempting to influence the decisions of a European central bank. That will have far-reaching effects on the lives of all our citizens, and it is totally unacceptable.

We are not today debating the European central bank, but there is an enormous and significant difference between that bank as described in the treaty and the proposals for the Bank of England set out in the Bill. The Bill is intended as a halfway house towards our economy being managed by a European central bank. Only by giving it independence at this stage can we take the necessary steps of joining the exchange rate mechanism for two years, joining the single European currency and being subsumed in the European central bank—when our gold reserves will be carried off to Germany.

All that flows from this legislation as, without the establishment as an interim measure of an independent British central bank, it will not be possible for us to join European monetary union. Indeed, the Maastricht treaty makes it clear that countries must establish independent central banks before they can join the European central bank. Those seem good reasons for being suspicious of and, indeed, hostile to the idea of an independent central Bank of England, which will take these vital decisions on monetary matters.

The Bill raises three main political considerations. The great macro-economic objections, which were mentioned by the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), are that the Bill involves the separation of fiscal and monetary policy. That is a profound mistake, and it will lead to great trouble. It will make it much more difficult to manage the British economy efficiently, particularly in times of difficulty, if the Chancellor of the Exchequer is not in control of monetary as well as fiscal policy.

Nye Bevan is famously quoted as saying, "You don't have to read the book because it's all in the crystal ball," although he put it the other way round. The crystal ball shows clearly that a tight monetary policy was operated in tandem with a loose fiscal policy in the United States in the 1980s, and that we had the same thing in Germany in the 1990s after reunification—the Bundesbank operated a tight monetary policy while Chancellor Kohl's Government operated a lax fiscal policy. That impinged harshly on the British economy, because of our membership of the exchange rate mechanism between 1990 and 1992.

Over-tough German monetary policy led to a much too tight monetary policy here at an inappropriate time in our monetary cycle. That caused appalling hardship in my constituency. Many small farmers and business men were bankrupted. It would not be an exaggeration to say that that hardship was the main cause of the Conservatives' unpopularity at the last general election, which stemmed from residual memories of those years of our membership of the ERM. It is extraordinary that there are those in the Labour party, of all parties, who want to go down that road again.

Unemployment has always seemed to me to be the most appalling of all social scourges. I belong to a generation who remember the prewar years. One of my earliest memories was of standing in the dole queue with my

father, who had been a rubber planter in Malaya. When the slump meant that one could not sell rubber anywhere in the world, he came back to England, quite unqualified to work here, and he remained unemployed throughout most of my childhood, until the war broke out and he was able to join the Army again.

My memories of the 1930s motivated my economics rather more than my subsequent reading of John Maynard Keynes, although he gave me the intellectual understanding of how all that unemployment came about. It is amazing to me that the Labour party, of all parties, has abandoned all those memories and does not seem to appreciate that, if we join a single European currency and have independent banks—whether British or, worse still, foreign—unemployment in this country will be much higher than it would otherwise be. That is not a party political point; it is demonstrably the case.

As almost everyone who has spoken in the debate has admitted, and as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) rightly said, central bankers, by their nature, have a bias in favour of deflation. The right hon. Member for Llanelli also pointed that out very well. Whenever a group of central bankers get together, they are entirely preoccupied with the level of inflation. Of course that is important.

Mr. Radice: There is a famous central banker called Mr. Greenspan who clearly looks after the real economy as well as the inflationary issues.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I know Mr. Greenspan and I knew his three predecessors. He has done a good job in the United States and he takes a considerable interest in levels of employment and investment, but the US Federal Reserve bank, or the Fed as it is called, is vastly more subject to pressures and to democratic accountability than anything suggested for the European central bank—there is simply no comparison.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Peter Tapsell: Let me finish my response to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice).

When asked a similar question by him during a previous speech, I spelled out at considerable length—I shall not repeat it now—the enormous degree of accountability to which the Fed was subject. Mr. Greenspan's immediate predecessor told me that he spent an inordinate amount of time preparing for congressional hearings, which were held in front of the television cameras with millions of his fellow Americans watching, to justify the Fed's every move on monetary matters.

There is no suggestion that pressure cannot be brought to bear on the Fed—every sort of pressure has been brought to bear: President Reagan tried to push out some members of the Fed and replace them with his own nominees, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt did the same in the 1930s. The Fed has always and openly been subject to tremendous pressures, which is regarded as entirely proper and appropriate, but the Maastricht treaty forbids that in respect of a European central bank. Any comparison between what is proposed for the people of this country if we join a single currency and what happens in America in respect of the Fed is entirely misleading.

Mr. Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Bank of England's forecasts on inflation are significantly more optimistic and up-beat than other outside forecasts? That casts doubt on the myth that the Bank of England is run by pessimistic deflationary bankers. In fact, it is not full of bankers but is run more widely by economists. Secondly, does he agree that the whole point of having a committee to hold the Bank of England to account is to ensure that it does not follow that we have a deflationary instinct, which has been suggested by several hon. Members on both sides of the House, and is simply false?

Sir Peter Tapsell: I am bound to say that I agree with every word that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe said on this point. I earned my living as a stockbroker for 35 years, and the research department of the firm in which I worked was nearly always more accurate in its forecasting than the Bank of England. We took pride in that fact, and there was widespread comment in the financial press whenever we were nearer the mark than the Bank.

The Bank of England was unduly pessimistic in my right hon. and learned Friend's last months as Chancellor. Although he said that his parliamentary colleagues were reluctant to express a view, several times during his last year as Chancellor I went up to him in the Division Lobbies and said how glad I was that he was resisting Bank pressure to raise interest rates, which I thought to be unnecessary.

I am sure that my right hon. and learned Friend was right to resist that pressure, and I agree with him that the Monetary Policy Committee will pursue unnecessarily deflationary policies, unless we are extremely careful. However, we will have to wait and see. Debates such as this and the occasional contact that even those of us who do not sit on the Treasury Committee have with members of the Monetary Policy Committee will be useful, because the committee can be made aware that we in the House of Commons are anxious about the possibility of unnecessarily deflationary policies. One hopes that they will therefore guard against them.

Ms Abbott: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, even though the Bank of England's current forecasts on inflation might be momentarily optimistic, the Bank's record as a forecaster is that it consistently shows a deflationary bias?

Sir Peter Tapsell: Yes, that is what I believe. I do not criticise the Bank of England for that—in fact, I have the greatest admiration for the Bank. After the protection of the currency in an international sense, it is the prime duty of a central bank to avoid inflation, and the Bill puts that duty into law; but I object to the Bank being free from political control in that respect. It is one thing to have the Bank advising the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the dangers of inflation, but it is better that the Chancellor, having weighed the advice, should if necessary be able to reject it and subsequently give his reasons for doing so, which was the practice under the Conservative Government.

I do not want anything I have said to be perceived as meaning that I do not regard the pursuit of stable prices as exceedingly important—of course I do. They are a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for steady growth and high and stable levels of employment, but if we are going to publish an annual inflation target each year, why should we not also have annual employment and growth targets?

[Sir Peter Tapsell]

In my time in the House of Commons, I have noticed that all Ministers have always refused to estimate future levels of employment. How is it possible to be confident that one has got the inflation target right 12 months ahead if one is not prepared to state one's employment target 12 months ahead? In Committee, we should try to amend the Bill so that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has to give employment and growth targets as well as an inflation target.

Incidentally, that would horrify the Bank of England. Whenever I have suggested it to Bank officials, they have always replied that they would not want to take on that responsibility.

Any fool—and the Bank of England is not staffed by fools—can produce stable prices by plunging an economy into the doldrums, as Montagu Norman demonstrated in the 1920s and 1930s, and as the current rulers of many of the continental European countries are demonstrating daily.

By far the best economic state paper published this century was the all-party 1944 White Paper on employment, which made a point of saying that four aims should be given equal significance: stable prices, high levels of employment, a healthy balance of payments and an expanding economy. Those are the four economic balls that a Chancellor should always be juggling, so that no one ball falls to the ground.

It is a great mistake to toss one of those balls—the monetary ball—across to the Bank of England and to leave the elected politicians to play with the other three. That might work for a time when unemployment is falling, but when unemployment starts to rise, this parliamentary democracy—as long as it is not abolished by our joining a single European currency—will not tolerate the key decisions affecting everyday life being taken by anyone other than Ministers answerable to the House.

I turn finally to more technical, but still vital, issues posed by the Bill. Having been stripped of its supervisory role and its responsibility for managing the public debt through the gilt-edged market, it is not at all clear in the Bill whether the Bank of England is to continue to act as the lender of last resort. That is a matter of vital importance on which we need complete clarity, so I hope that, when she replies to the debate, the Economic Secretary will make a point of explaining whether the Bank is still to be regarded as the lender of last resort.

The capacity to act effectively and in time as lender of last resort in a crisis such as the Barings crisis depends on the Bank's commercial intelligence system. The roles of prudential supervision and operational surveillance are closely linked, but they are not the same thing, and they are now to be separated, leaving the bank with responsibility for operational surveillance but stripped of its powers for supervising prudential banking.

Will the Bank continue to have the same day-to-day knowledge of everything that is happening in the banking world when its supervision staff are transferred to the new Financial Services Authority? I doubt it, although it will retain responsibility for the stability of the financial system as a whole. I therefore predict considerable buck-passing in the years ahead between the Financial Services Authority and the Bank of England when anything goes wrong. The Bank of England will say, "We could not have known in advance that this would happen: we no longer supervise that institution, and the FSA never told us." That will be a source of great trouble, whichever political party is in power.

The fundamental truth about the Bill, however, is that, overall, it gives the Bank of England a greatly diminished institutional status. This aspect has been largely overlooked by commentators, who have concentrated on the Bank's enhanced independence in the setting of interest rates, but everyone in the Bank of England understands all too well the loss of power and prestige that will flow from the Government announcement of 6 May, which is why the Governor of the Bank of England very nearly resigned on that day, as he has said.

Ever since it was founded in the reign of King William III, the Bank of England has exercised authority over a wider range of matters than any other central bank. That has been one reason for its great prestige. The Bill strips the Bank of many of its most important powers. It will no longer exercise prudential supervision over the financial institutions. It will no longer manage the Government bond market and the public debt.

I can tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from my experience as a stockbroker, that the Bank of England officials who operated in the Bank's supervision departments and in the gilt-edged departments enjoyed enormous prestige in the City of London. They were regarded as doing vital jobs and were treated with great respect, even by the most senior and successful of commercial bankers. When one takes those tasks away from the Bank of England, one is in fact, despite giving it enhanced powers over interest rates, transforming it into a quango, in which all but two of the new nine-man Monetary Policy Committee will be appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer—and the other two, appointed by the Governor, will also have to be approved by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Furthermore, anyone with acquaintances in the lower echelons of the Bank of England will know of the crisis in morale that is gripping the whole staff of the Bank of England. Previously, Bank of England technical professionals wielded great power and influence—I have mentioned two of the spheres in which they did so. Although there has always been a court of directors, it was composed of non-executive directors who used to meet for lunch once a month and were usually grandees from other walks of life. In the career structure of the Bank, the objective of most Bank of England staff was to become an executive director; that was what motivated them.

There will not now be many jobs for executive directors, so the career structure of the Bank of England has been largely destroyed by the proposals in the Bill. That will have a significant effect because, when I was at university, it was a matter of great prestige to get into the Bank of England on leaving university. Only getting into the Treasury or the Foreign Office ranked higher in prestige if one was seeking a career in public service.

Under these proposals, few high fliers will want to join the Bank of England at the age of 23 and make a career. There will be no career for them. Only comparative mediocrities will join the Bank of England from now on. That is what my friends in the Bank of England, of whom I have several, tell me. It is the almost universal view of the junior and middle ranks of the Bank of England.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you may say that this is a matter of personalities and that it does not matter, but part of the prestige enjoyed worldwide by the City of London has

flowed from the immense respect in which its prime institution, the Bank of England, has been held by commercial, as well as central, bankers throughout the world. By diminishing the role of the Bank of England, as he is doing in the Bill, the Chancellor is reducing the standing of the City.

The Chancellor and many others in the modern world dislike deference in all its forms, but deference to the Bank of England has been an important economic asset for the United Kingdom. Probably this will not worry the Chancellor, as he hopes to subsume the Bank of England into a European central bank run by foreigners over whom the British electorate and their representatives in this House will have no control, as I have shown by my quotations from the Maastricht treaty.

My conclusion is that the Bill should be opposed, not only on the practical grounds that it will make the efficient macro-economic management of our affairs more difficult, lead to higher levels of unemployment than are necessary and diminish the power, influence and prestige of the Bank of England, but above all because it is a further constitutional retreat along the road to a single European currency and the sacrifice of British parliamentary self-government to the bureaucracies of a federal Europe.

7.6 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): There is no more powerful thing in the realm of economic ideas than fashion, and it is with some timidity that I stand up against the prevailing tide of fashion, which says that the answer for the British economy is an independent central bank; none the less, faced with the facts, I must do so.

It was remarkable to see a Labour Government, elected in triumph with the biggest majority since the war, within days—not even weeks, but days—hand over one of the most important levers of economic power to an unelected quango. Of course, as my hon. Friends will remind me, at the time it was greeted with tremendous acclaim by the popular press. We must thank for that the—until recently unsung—labours of Charlie Whelan, who span it to political journalists in such a way that the coverage of the decision made it seem comparable to Moses parting the Red sea. Interestingly, the Government chose to announce the decision, not on the Floor of the House, where they might have been challenged and questioned, but in the press, via spin doctors.

Even in the clamour of the acclaim and the triumph, however, I was reminded of nothing so much as a quotation from Horace Walpole:

"They now ring the bells, but they will soon wring their hands."

Everyone in the House wants low inflation. It is relatively easy to bring down inflation by simply slowing down activity; the trick is to achieve growth and low inflation. The argument that I have consistently advanced in my eight years on the Treasury Select Committee, and which I advance tonight in the Chamber, is that an independent central bank is not the best way to combine low inflation with growth.

I really cannot accept the attempts of Ministers to wrap this policy decision up in the mantra of modernity. A bad idea is a bad idea, regardless of whether one calls it "modern". And the idea that there is anything modern in going backwards in monetary policy to a set-up that was discredited before most Members of the House were born—the idea that we are modernising monetary policy by going backwards to the set-up of the 1930s—does not bear examination.

I remind hon. Members that an independent central bank is not a new idea: Britain had experience of an independent central bank until 1945. I shall quote from the 1945 Labour manifesto—I know that it will embarrass some of my hon. Friends who do not like to remember that Labour has a past—which contained a commitment to bring the Bank of England under the control of the Government.

Referring to the 1930s, the manifesto said:

"Great economic blizzards swept the world in those years. The great inter-war slumps were not acts of God or of blind forces. They were the sure and certain result of the concentration of too much economic power in the hands of too few men. These men had only learned how to act in the interests of their own bureaucratically-run private monopolies which may be likened to totalitarian oligarchies within our democratic state. They had and they felt no responsibility to the nation."

The issue of democratic accountability caused the 1945 Labour Government—I think everyone will concede that it was one of the greatest Labour Governments—to bring the Bank of England under democratic control. I argue that, far from being outmoded and swept aside by the triumphal progress of new Labour, the democratic accountability issue is as relevant today as it ever was.

A fundamental problem with the Bill and the proposal is that they create a democratic deficit. My hon. Friends who support the proposal go on about monetary policy as though it were a mere technical matter that is best left to technicians with oily rags—politicians should not bother their heads about it. The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) said that, if the Government leave monetary policy to the independent central bank, they can concentrate on things that really shape the long-term economy. What a fatuous thing to say. What shapes the long-term economy more than the level of interest rates?

When Europhile Members talk about other European countries and their independent central banks, they do not mention that the role of interest rates in the British economy is rather different, and slightly more sensitive, than that in other economies. For example, in Germany, a far smaller proportion of people own their own homes. Those who do have fixed rate mortgages, with interest rates fixed for the term of the mortgage.

It is worth politicians' remembering that the British body politic is far more sensitive to changes in interest rates than the body politic in Germany or France. That is not the most important reason, but it is one reason why we should be wary of assuming that, because something works on the continent, it must work here also.

Sir Michael Spicer: I hesitate to interrupt a most enjoyable and very interesting speech. The hon. Lady is correct in her description of German interest rate levels and how they compare with ours, and many hon. Members will agree with her comments. Does she agree that the task of trying to make the economies of Britain and Germany "converge"—to use the current idiom—is pretty well impossible?

Ms Abbott: That is another speech for another time, which the hon. Gentleman may await at his pleasure.

It is not just a matter of the British body politic being more sensitive to interest rates. All adherents to the idea of an independent central bank ignore the fact that interest

[Ms Abbott]

rates are not a technical matter: they should not be decided in Eddie George's boardroom once a month. Interest rates affect not just house prices, but the level of bankruptcy among businesses and the level of unemployment.

I put it to the House—I have held this position consistently—that it is not the job of central bankers to decide issues that directly affect the levels of jobs, bankruptcy and economic despair among our constituents.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham) *rose—*

Ms Abbott: Please allow me to develop my argument. I realise that many distinguished hon. Members are passionate about this subject, but I must continue.

Much has been said about how the Treasury Select Committee will hold the new independent central bank to account. I bow to no one in my respect for the Treasury Select Committee, under the distinguished chairmanship of my colleague the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice). However, we cannot seriously believe that the Treasury Committee, with two and a half special advisers, can hold to account the Monetary Policy Committee and the battalions of economists behind Eddie George.

Mr. Radice: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: I wish to continue. Many hon. Members wish to participate in the debate.

When people make comparisons with the situation in the United States and the Federal Reserve, they must examine also the resources available to those Congress committees that hold the Federal Reserve to account.

I put it to the Treasury: if it is serious about holding the Monetary Policy Committee to account, it should give the Treasury Select Committee not only more powers, but the resources, the back-up and the manpower to match the institutions that it is supposed to hold to account. The Treasury Select Committee has slender resources and other broad responsibilities. It is ludicrous to suggest seriously that it can hold the Bank and the Monetary Policy Committee to account in any meaningful way.

I also have a problem with the intellectual basis for the decision. I would argue that is very flimsy: it is all about the power of fashion. My right hon. Friend said, rather grandly, earlier in the debate that the Government have taken these decisions "because we know they are right". That is quite an impressive statement, but how do we know that they are right? That may be a naive question, but I believe that it is the sort of question that one is sent to this place to ask.

It is worth making another point that has not been made all evening. Although there is a relationship between independent central banks and low inflation—there is no question about that—a definite causal link between an independent central bank and low inflation has never been established. In other words, contrary to what my hon. Friends and some Liberal Democrats may say, merely having an independent central bank by no means guarantees low inflation. I would argue that a country such as Germany, which has an independent central bank, has that independent central bank because it has a low-inflation culture.

Let us stop and ask ourselves why the Germans feel strongly about low inflation and are willing to make sacrifices to keep it low. Twice in people's lifetimes, Germany suffered hyper-inflation—first under the Weimar republic and then immediately after the second world war. That country has an almost primal fear of hyper-inflation. I believe that it is not the independence of the Bundesbank that has caused Germany's excellent low-inflation record, but Germany's history and the state of its economy that has created a low-inflation climate, of which an independent central bank is a symptom and not a cause.

The Bill will hand over one of the most important levers of economic policy to Eddie George. Let me say a word about the Governor of the Bank of England—he will no doubt read the transcript of the debate, if he is not listening to it now at the Bank. I think that Eddie George is a great man, and a fine Governor of the Bank of England. In fact, he plans to come to the House a week tomorrow to speak to the Campaign Group of Labour Members of Parliament about these matters.

I urge all my hon. Friends to attend that meeting, which will provide one of the few opportunities for Back Benchers to question Eddie George closely. He is a fine public servant, and he clearly has a deflationary bias. There is nothing wrong with a central banker having a deflationary bias. That is what central bankers are for. What is wrong is to let central bankers off the leash—to allow central bankers, with their inflationary bias, to set interest rates with no checks or balances or accountability.

I believe that, in introducing the Bill, my hon. Friends in the Treasury are victims of economic fashion. There is considerable academic evidence that the downside of an independent central bank is, as was said earlier, that it is hard to achieve co-ordination of policy, and there are risks to jobs and growth, and the danger of an overvalued pound.

I remind the House that, of the 20 most frequently cited studies on central bank independence, only one associates independent central banks with growth. In a study by Guy Debelle and Stanley Fischer, they stated:

"Since 1962, countries with independent central banks have suffered deeper recessions on average than those without."

Mark Hutchison and Carl Walsh found the same thing in a study of New Zealand, and Robert Chote, the financial editor of the *Financial Times*, writing in a personal capacity, said:

"People may lose their jobs unnecessarily because Mr. Brown is abdicating responsibility for achieving his inflation targets to the Bank."

I believe that the wrong decision has been taken, for the wrong reasons, and announced in the wrong way. I believe that, sadly, before the end of this Parliament, I will be proved right on the deflationary bias of letting the central bank decide monetary policy without any democratic checks and balances. For those reasons, I cannot support my Government in the Lobby tonight.

7.20 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Opposition Members found that a most enjoyable speech. I look forward to seeing how the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) votes tonight after such a wonderful speech. Her colleagues on the Government Front Bench looked pretty grim throughout most of it.

Like the hon. Lady, I have long held reservations about the concept of an independent central bank. Let us not beat about the bush or kid ourselves: once the Bill is enacted, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will have a legitimate right to deflect the questions of hon. Members on any matters to do with interest rate policy. Furthermore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell) said, it is probable that, on many other matters of monetary policy, we will not be able to question in the House and hold to account the person who is meant to be in charge of the economic management of the country.

Despite the great reservations of most Conservative Members, the real dilemmas are those of Labour Members. The Conservative party has for many years been committed to the concept and the priority of price stability, but that does not apply to Labour. So many of the coded objections and reservations that are being expressed have at their root a fundamental concern about priority being given to price stability in the economic management of the country.

That is why Labour Members have been banging on about the fact that the Bill states that the Bank of England shall take into account economic policy other than price stability, that it will be subject to the priority of price stability. Clauses 11 and 12 bother Labour Members.

Clause 19 gives the Government overriding powers if they see matters getting out of control. It refers to "extreme economic circumstances", which I imagine might include an impending general election.

Mr. Radice: That is for you lot.

Sir Michael Spicer: That is a let-out which is written into the Bill.

My concerns are the opposite of those expressed by Labour Members. The Bill opens up the possibility of questioning the price stability objective. Already in the debate, and certainly among some of my Labour colleagues on the Treasury Select Committee, it has been pointed out that the Bank must take account of other objectives. When should price stability be said to have come about? Some discretion is possible, with regard to time. Under the Bill, the bank must take into account objectives other than price stability.

I have two fundamental objections to a Bill requiring the Bank to take into account objectives other than the narrow one of price stability.

The first relates to a matter raised by the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), who was rather unfairly attacked by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). The hon. Member for North Durham is rather a good Chairman of the Select Committee, if we must have a Labour Chairman. I suspect that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby does not like the hon. Gentleman's views on Europe, and I agree with him. The hon. Member for North Durham and I do not agree at all on Europe, but that is no reason to attack his chairmanship of the Select Committee. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby was most unfair.

In an exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle, the hon. Member for North Durham raised the issue of Mr. Greenspan and the Federal Reserve, and the additional powers that Mr. Greenspan had. My hon. Friend observed that Mr. Greenspan was more accountable than other central bankers.

I was worried by the tone and direction of that discussion. It was implied that, if we chose the American route, it would lead to government by bank. Once the Bank is given responsibility, not just for the narrow application of the Government's inflation target—which, to be fair, is being offered—but for a panoply of economic objectives, however accountable one pretends the bank is, it will never really be accountable to the people.

Labour Members who support the Government on the Bill will push the Government—they are already probing in the debate and elsewhere—to turn the bank into the economic manager of our country. That is dangerous territory. At least the Bill restricts the bank to a limited monetary application of a target set by the Government. Once we try to move beyond that—

Mr. Radice: The Bill puts the matter simply. It states that the primary task of the Bank is to concern itself with inflation, but it must also consider the objectives of Government economic policy, which include growth and employment. It does not hand over everything; it gives the Bank a role.

Sir Michael Spicer: The hon. Gentleman puts the matter in terms that worry me greatly. Once the bank starts to think of matters other than the narrow remit of the monetary policy it should set in order to achieve a target given to it by politicians, we are in dangerous territory.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that that is becoming the public perception of the way in which the bank will operate. I greatly admire Anatole Kaletsky, and agree with him on almost every aspect of European policy. I particularly agree with his article in *The Times* today, in which he exposed the fallacy of the leadership of the Confederation of British Industry and the figures it claims in support of its opposition to the single currency. That was a brilliant article. Last week he wrote a piece on the Bill in which he said:

"In the long run, public support must be any central bank's overriding objective."

He continued:

"That is why it was right to raise interest rates yesterday but equally the Bank cannot afford to be acquiescent in high unemployment or snuff out economic growth."

Once we talk about the Bank being popular or unpopular, we are in extremely dangerous territory. We are talking, in effect, of handing over the task of politicians to not a surrogate but a real government. That course is being pressed by Labour members of the Select Committee, who probe those who come before us in an attempt to get them to say, as in a way the Chairman, the hon. Member for North Durham said just now, that there is a range of objectives that the Bank must take into account and have in mind when it is applying its interest rates policy.

In that approach, we are talking about a parallel Government. That causes me enormous worry, and that is one of the fundamental reasons why I am against the Bill and the path we are following.

In this instance, the Labour party cannot have its cake and eat it. If it claims enormous responsibility for having set up a mechanism because it did not trust itself to apply a proper inflation-price-stability policy—a mechanism for

[Sir Michael Spicer]

achieving that and guaranteeing it—it will have to accept that there may be a price to be paid in short-term unemployment.

Present conditions are relatively easy for the Government because the Conservative Government left this Administration with such a strong economy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell) said, it is possible now to have four or five objectives in mind at one time because they can all be met simultaneously. The problem will arise for the Government—the time may not be too far off—when they suddenly find themselves, in their own words, having to make hard choices. When that happens they will try to fudge. At the same time they will try to bully the Bank. Not only that, they will try to cast the blame on it for getting things wrong. In those circumstances we are without democratic government. That is what worries me so much about the implications of the Bill.

7.32 pm

Ms Ruth Kelly (Bolton, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in such an important debate. The move to grant operational independence to the Bank of England is certainly the most radical shake-up that has been seen in the operation of monetary policy since sterling's departure from the exchange rate mechanism, and possibly the most radical shake-up since the war.

I shall not engage in the argument as to whether low inflation or price stability is a good idea. Many reputable economists have argued that there is no long-run trade-off between prices and output—the objective of monetary policy should be to provide a platform of stability for savers and investors to enable them to plan their futures, an objective which, if met, could increase the long-run growth rate of the economy.

I was struck today by the comments of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who asked why we should not continue the practice of the Chancellor of the Exchequer always taking decisions on interest rates. After all, the right hon. and learned Gentleman argued, he was always right and the Bank was always wrong about interest rates, whatever the facts of the case.

Anyone who argues that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe showed better judgment than the Bank is severely misled. He took risks. He was also lucky. His most important piece of luck was the unexpected and massive appreciation of sterling since last August, and who would argue that that was a good thing? The appreciation of sterling was the only factor that ensured that the right hon. and learned Gentleman hit his inflation target; without it, he would have missed it hopelessly.

Mr. Gibb: I agree with the hon. Lady that the rise in sterling has been damaging to large parts of the economy, but will she explain how the Government's proposal will lead to a depreciation of sterling?

Ms Kelly: I shall address the impact of interest rates on sterling later.

Under the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, we saw a cavalier attitude to his inflation target in which economic propriety was sacrificed to political advantage. I do not accept for one minute that the right hon. and learned Gentleman did not think that he was taking a risk with inflation. He was certainly prepared to take a risk, and prepared to stoke up inflationary pressures within the economy. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman had been allowed to continue his policy, we could have seen the re-emergence of yet another unsustainable Tory boom named after a Chancellor.

It is not only the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe who has played fast and loose with monetary policy, however. It seems that the practice is endemic to the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer. One just has to consider different countries throughout the world which operate in very different environments when considering bank independence, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) said. Evidence suggests that independence is associated with lower inflation. Only one study suggests that it is connected with the growth of output. The implication is that it is possible to have low inflation without any loss of output or jobs.

Some will argue, of course, that the Bank has the opposite flaw—that it has a tendency to excessive caution. I suppose that many right hon. and hon. Members would adopt that argument. Indeed, I heard the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe taking up that very point, but the facts do not support it. Contrary to popular wisdom, the Bank's record since 1992 when the current system was set up has been incredibly impressive. Its track record demonstrates that it has consistently been among the most optimistic economic forecasters. Since 1992 it has nearly always been in the bottom quarter of economic forecasters, being far more optimistic than it has been given credit for.

Indeed, the Bank's record shows that it was overly optimistic. Inflation outturns have consistently been in excess of the then Government's target of 2.5 per cent. over the past few years.

The Bank has independence, whereas Chancellors are prone to political manipulation—a fact that has been recognised. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said that few decisions made by Ministers had been met with such acclaim as the decision to grant operational independence to the Bank. The immediate reward was half a point off gilt yields. If the Bank is successful over time in reducing inflation to meet the Government's inflation target, gilt prices could fall even further.

Gavyn Davies, the chief economist at Goldman Sachs, has estimated that, if yields on long bonds fall eventually by a full point, the Government's funding costs will be reduced by about £3.5 billion. That sum could be invested in the economy and could be used for extra public spending. A fall in bond yields would also reduce the cost of investment for private investors, and hence boost the economy in that way.

I accept that some people have fundamental points to counter Bank independence, including those who have raised the problem of co-ordinating monetary and fiscal policy. It is true that, if we had an all-knowing benevolent Government who took all decisions in the national interest with no prospect or hint of political interference, it might be possible to deliver price stability, but anyone who thinks that that has been happening over the past 25 years

must have been living on another planet. Instead of stability, Government co-ordination has delivered boom and bust, unemployment and insecurity.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the hon. Lady define more closely what she describes as "political interference" and the difference, in her estimation, between such interference and the exercise of political will as accountable to the electorate?

Ms Kelly: I think that I have defined exactly what I mean by political interference. I have argued that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe played fast and loose with monetary policy and risked stoking up an inflationary boom just because an election was approaching.

I shall now come back to the point about sterling, if I may. Some argue that relying so heavily on monetary policy to deliver the inflation target adds to the imbalance in the economy and contributed to the recent rise in sterling. I would draw their attention to the recent study carried out by Bank of England economists and referred to in yesterday's *Financial Times*, which showed that much less than a quarter of the recent rise in sterling since last August can be accounted for by monetary policy decisions, by expectations of future decisions or by anything to do with monetary policy.

I will now deal with the charge that the inflation target ignores output. It was very interesting to hear some people argue that the central bank should have nothing to do with output while others argue that it should have targets for growth and output. Some argue that it is necessary to supplement the inflation target with separate, different targets. There is a separate case for that.

It may be desirable to have targets to raise the underlying growth rate of the economy, but I would argue that output is not ignored when decisions are taken on interest rates. Those decisions are not completely technocratic—important judgments will be made in the short run between output and inflation.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has framed his inflation target in such a way as to ensure that it is impossible to hit with precision at every moment. Indeed, the Governor of the Bank of England has recognised that, operationally, he interprets the target as meaning that the bank should aim to hit it on average over time, that the way to judge him will be to look back in five years' time, or whatever, to see whether he has achieved an average rate of 2.5 per cent. over that period.

That means, inevitably, that the bank will have some discretion as to how it reacts to unexpected events which occur not just from month to month or year to year but from day to day. There will be events that impact on the economy, whether generated from the domestic economy or from abroad. Some of these completely unpredictable events—or supply shocks, such as a rise in the price of oil—will, if no corrective action is taken, reduce output and raise inflation. In those circumstances I would argue that it would be wise for the Bank to let inflation rise temporarily and not to exacerbate the short-term loss of output.

I completely disagree that such discretion is undesirable. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor recognised this dilemma in his Mansion House speech, in which he set out a system whereby the bank would have to write an open letter if inflation breached the trigger points of 1.5 per cent. or 3.5 per cent. The Bank has to write an open letter to say what action it intends to take to return inflation to the target, and the time scale in which it intends that that should happen. He does not assume that the target will be met continuously.

As Mervyn King, director of monetary policy at the Bank, and soon to be Deputy Governor, argued in his lecture to the London School of Economics last week:

> "It is striking that central banks have been reluctant to acknowledge openly that monetary policy has two components, an inflation target and a response to shocks. Provided an inflation target framework is interpreted to include these two distinct elements of monetary policy, then the charge of the critics that inflation targets mean ignoring output is false. Moreover, by allowing the horizon over which inflation is brought back to its target level to depend upon the nature and size of the shocks hitting the economy such a policy . . . is superior in principle to"

the alternatives.

Mr. Gibb: Did the hon. Lady not say in the Treasury Select Committee that how far the Bank of England deviates from its inflation target, how it deals with output in dealing with shocks, are political issues, but that the Bank of England appears to have great discretion here?

Ms Kelly: I would argue that these decisions are fundamental to the way in which monetary policy is carried out. It is for those precise reasons that I would argue that proper accountability of the Bank is essential. In fact, precisely because of these responsibilities, the Treasury Select Committee has been given much greater powers to examine the Bank's policy and to hold it to account.

The Select Committee system is recognised by Parliament and operates in the normal fashion. It is for those reasons that, although I support the Bill and support the granting of independence to the Bank, I argue that the hand of Parliament should be strengthened so that a Select Committee can properly carry out its responsibilities and hold the Bank to account.

In particular, I suggest, as the Treasury Select Committee has suggested in its recent report, that members of the Monetary Policy Committee have the opportunity to come before the Select Committee in confirmatory hearings after their nomination to the Monetary Policy Committee by the Chancellor. I do not believe that such hearings would deter applicants. Given our assessment of the situation, it is clear that some of them would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Select Committee to clear up any points of potential public controversy.

Such a system would enhance transparency and aid accountability. It would also shield the Chancellor from any charges that appointments might have been made on party political grounds.

It is also vital—here I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington—that extra resources should be granted to the Select Committee so that it can correctly discharge its responsibilities and ask questions about the trade-offs that the Bank has made between output and inflation in the short run.

The Bill is moving in the correct direction, and I welcome it. It is precisely because this decision is so momentous that I hope that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will take the Select Committee's considerations seriously.

7.45 pm

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): It was a pity that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was not here to answer some of the allegations made about him by the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly). Some of those allegations were very strong, and I am sure that when he reads them in *Hansard* he will be very disappointed that he was not here to answer them.

I am sympathetic in principle to the idea of central bank independence, but I cannot support these half-baked proposals. I shall explain why in just a moment. Before I do, I want to clear up one issue that has been bouncing around in the House this evening: whether the decision to go ahead with independence was a breach of the Labour party's pledge in its manifesto. The manifesto says pretty clearly:

"We will reform the Bank of England to ensure that decision-making on monetary policy is more effective, open and accountable."

That may seem fairly clear, were it not for the fact that almost identical words were used by the Prime Minister when he was Leader of the Opposition. In a speech in 1995, he then went on to say that, after those reforms had been put in place:

"We will then watch the track record of the Bank before deciding what, if any, further steps should be taken towards greater operational responsibility for the Bank in interest rate policy."

It is absolutely clear that the public were misled by the manifesto wording. That is a disgrace. It is nothing more than we might expect. There was, of course, another remark from the then Leader of the Opposition along the lines, "We have no plans to raise taxes at all." How does that sit alongside the raid on pension funds? Or, to go back to the manifesto again, a line immediately above the one about the Bank, which says:

"We will match the current target for low and stable inflation of 2.5 per cent. or less."

Within a few weeks, that target was changed to a band, making inflation of 3.5 per cent. permissible. Those breaches of pledge do not register with the electors at the moment, but they will in time—as will the arrogance of the Chancellor, for example, when he reluctantly came to the House to announce Bank of England independence.

I want to make three points. First, I want to explain why Bank of England independence has become such an issue only over the past 15 years. Secondly, I want to explain why the proposals in the Bill are a bit of a dog's dinner and why they probably will not deliver independence—I would be much more sympathetic to them if I thought they would. Thirdly, I want to suggest how, with the help of the Treasury Select Committee, the proposals could be made a little more palatable.

For most of modern economic history—that is, the industrialised and relatively free trading period of the last 150 years—monetary policy was set by an external anchor: the exchange rate. For most of that time the monetary anchor was the gold standard, or Bretton Woods in the post-war period. National monetary policy was subordinate to the external anchor, so central bank independence did not matter very much.

It was only after Bretton Woods collapsed that the debate about central bank independence gathered pace, both here and abroad—a period during which many countries decided to create independent central banks, and a time during which successive Britain Governments had directors at the International Monetary Fund who were busy encouraging all countries to adopt independent central banks.

After the collapse of Bretton Woods, our politicians soon had British monetary policy in a mess, which began to be sorted out only when the IMF arrived in 1976. Even so, attempts to find a substitute for the exchange rate anchor have had a mixed track record. Monetary base control was rejected as too crude, so it was never tried. Targeting the monetary aggregates became difficult with financial deregulation. Before long, policy became extremely discretionary, and it appeared that all depended on what the Chancellor thought.

The problem for Britain with the discretionary approach, especially as other countries separated monetary policy from short-term political control, was that the UK's policy appeared to carry less and less credibility in the markets. A credibility gap was opening up between our monetary policy on inflation and those of the best-performing countries. It was a measurable gap in terms of bond yield differentials. Of course, part of the premium we were paying reflected policy mistakes, but the policy makers are just as likely to make misjudgments whether they sit in Threadneedle street or in Whitehall.

The main purpose of central bank independence is not to call upon superior minds to do the job—I do not think that they are better ones in Threadneedle street—but to close the credibility gap and deal with the belief that politicians might be meddling in monetary policy with political objectives in mind.

The crucial question is whether the Bill's proposals close the credibility gap. Do they really distance the Chancellor from decisions on short-term interest rates? That gap will be reduced only to the extent that people believe that the Bank is fully independent, and that is where these proposals are at their most deficient: there are too many get-out clauses—too many opportunities for the Government to meddle.

It is, of course, right that the Bank should be obliged to act in accordance with overall Government economic policy—as set out in clause 11. The statutes of most central banks include something similar. Even the Bundesbank's statutes carry a similar injunction. The problems start with the fact that only operational responsibility is being given to the Bank; the inflation target will continue to be set by the Chancellor. As I have just said, he loosened the inflation target as one of his first gestures.

Then there is the so-called override whereby, at least temporarily, the Chancellor can assume direct control over interest rate policy. Presumably, he would want to do that only when he could not achieve his objectives by relaxing the inflation target. It is a draconian power.

Most worrying of all—other hon. Members have referred to this—is the term of office given to the Monetary Policy Committee. Of its nine members, five are effectively controlled one way or another by the Bank of England. Six—of whom two come from the group controlled by the Bank—are appointed for a term of only three years. Even the Governor and the Deputy Governors are appointed for only five years. That compares with the Bundesbank council, which has an appointment period of eight years, and with the US Federal Reserve board, to which appointments are for 14 years.

If the main purpose is to generate belief in the markets that interest rate policy will not be subject to short-term political considerations, it is as plain as a pikestaff that the terms of office should be longer than the life of a typical Parliament. Seven years sounds sensible; three will not do. As it happens, the Chancellor of the Exchequer made exactly that point, in a speech in May 1995 when in opposition, about his proposed advisory monetary policy committee's membership. He agreed that seven years would be right, so why on earth is that number not in the Bill? The fact that the Government seem reluctant to budge on any of these points must mean that, at the first sign of trouble, markets may once again open up the credibility gap.

What can we do if the Bill does not find support in the Lobby tonight? We shall have to rely on the Treasury Committee—I was pleased to hear some of the remarks of the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) on that. The Committee will have to make the best of a botched job and at least inject some accountability into the proposals. These arrangements give the Committee some scope to exercise that power, although there is no mention of that in the Bill—I gather from an earlier response to an intervention that that is for technical reasons. Incidentally, giving Parliament a more direct role in this area is an innovation; Parliament has never had a direct responsibility for the creation of money, or for the operation of monetary policy: both have always been matters for Executive—and before that Prerogative—control.

I am pleased that the Treasury Committee will look beyond how well the Monetary Policy Committee will deliver the inflation target and look at the target itself and ask, "Is this the right target?" In doing so, I hope that it will take evidence not just from the Chancellor or even the Governor, but also from individual members of the Monetary Policy Committee. I am glad that the Treasury Committee will be able to dig its heels in to obtain some confirmation hearing power for all appointments to the Monetary Policy Committee; de facto, it will interview them. On this, the issue is not, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe suggested, that people with a particular view will be chosen; it is that the wider public should be allowed to know their views. We should have a clear explanation of their thinking on crucial issues.

I am also glad that the Treasury Committee will press for an extension of the term of office of the Monetary Policy Committee. Only if people have that extension will they speak freely when they come before the Select Committee. I also hope that the Treasury Committee will limit the scope of the Chancellor's use of the "extreme circumstances" clause. What are the extreme circumstances which might lead the Chancellor to override the Bank's operational independence? The circumstances must be defined. Let us go through the matter in detail.

Mr. Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman has made some play about the Chancellor intervening in the extreme circumstances of economic shocks; yet earlier we heard the former Chancellor—the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)—say that there is no opportunity for us to intervene. Where do the Opposition stand on the convergence criteria, as it appears that there are enormous divisions?

Mr. Tyrie: I am not on the Front Bench. I am expressing my view on the Bill. If we are going to go for independence, we must make a proper job of it and not have the sort of half-baked hotch-potch of a job that we have with this Bill. If we are going to go for independence, we must give the Bank not only operational responsibility but target or goal-performance responsibility.

Mr. Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tyrie: No, I will not give way a second time.

I am also concerned that members of the Monetary Policy Committee will not be permitted to speak their minds after committee meetings.

Mr. Loughton: Gagging orders.

Mr. Tyrie: Yes, it is like a gagging order. I disagree not so much with the purdah period that the committee has decided to impose on itself around the time of the meetings, as there is some sense in that, as with the six-week lag between meetings and publication of the minutes. Minutes should be published much more quickly, within a few days. Moreover, committee members should be free to speak about them and, if necessary, to dissent from the decisions that have been taken. The forces of collegiality in the committee will be strong enough to ensure that the freedom to speak will be exercised only in extreme circumstances.

If the Treasury succeeds in beefing up its role, we shall get at least half a loaf because, compared with current practice, there will be an increase in democratic accountability. For the first time, Parliament will have a little say in monetary policy.

It will, however, be only half a loaf. Today, we are not debating a proposal for genuine independence. At best, it is a faltering step along the way; at worst, it is another political stunt—an attempt by new Labour to shed responsibility for tough decisions while keeping its hands on policy.

If we cannot defeat the Bill in the Lobby today, it will be up to hon. Members—particularly those on the Treasury Select Committee—to try to make the best of this botched job.

8 pm

Mr. Keith Vaz (Leicester, East): I welcome the Bill and pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his boldness and determination in attempting to reform one of our most redoubtable institutions, the Bank of England. I congratulate him on the Bill's provision for transferring control of interest rates to the Monetary Policy Committee. For far too long, our economic strategy has been characterised by the boom and bust policies preferred by the Conservative party. The Bill will guarantee the fiscal and monetary stability that our economy badly needs.

I welcome also the Bill's provisions for transferring control of the regulation and supervision of banks to the Financial Services Authority. The measure will be of great

[Mr. Keith Vaz]

benefit on two counts: first, allowing the Bank to concentrate on its central task of maintaining economic stability; secondly, removing from the Bank a responsibility which it was totally inept in fulfilling—an incompetence demonstrated in its scandalous misconduct in the regulation of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International and of Barings.

The House knows of the long-standing support of many hon. Members for the campaign to obtain justice for the thousands of depositors who lost everything in the BCCI collapse. In the six and a half years since the bank closed, I and other hon. Members have met the tragic victims of BCCI. I remember meeting a man who won the Spanish lottery and put his winnings into BCCI one week, only to lose them in the bank's collapse a week later. I remember also pensioners in Gibraltar who lost their life savings, and people driven by the shock to hunger strike and, in some cases, almost to suicide. I continue to receive letters from people for whom the suffering and stress is as great and as real today as it was on 5 July 1991, the day that BCCI closed.

Six years after the then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry established a liquidation committee to chase up the $10 billion stolen by the fraudsters and to return the lost funds to the victims, depositors are not much closer to recovering their money than they were in 1991. Only one dividend, amounting to 24.5 per cent., has been paid out. Today—I do not know whether it was in advance of this debate—the liquidators announced for next year a second dividend, of 11.5 per cent. Despite those two payments—which amount to only 36 per cent. of the money that people had placed in BCCI—the tragedy of the bank's collapse continues.

I should remind the House of the closure of BCCI. It closed because the Bank of England used its supervisory powers to step in and shut down the bank's operations. The merit of that decision is questionable, because it was within the Bank's remit temporarily to restrict the bank's licence, to force a management change, or even to mount a rescue operation, as it had done in the case of other banks. It remains a matter of great consternation for thousands of victims that the Bank employed what can be described only as a discriminatory attitude towards BCCI, whose situation was not totally dissimilar to other banks facing crisis or fraud.

The decision to close the bank was made in a private meeting between the then Prime Minister, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, the then Governor of the Bank of England, Mr. Leigh-Pemberton, and the then Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, Mr. Eddie George. At the time, we pointed out that Mr. Eddie George, despite his involvement in the bank's closure, was promoted to the Bank's governorship. I stopped calling for Mr. George's resignation over BCCI because, every time I did so, he was promoted by the previous Government. Today, I resist the temptation to praise him or to call for extending his contract, as it may have the opposite effect.

Whatever the merits of the decision to close BCCI, the Bank's neglect of duty in allowing the fraud to be perpetrated for as long as it was, jeopardising the investments of thousands of depositors, is beyond doubt.

Lord Justice Bingham was asked to conduct the inquiry established by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer into the supervision of BCCI. He found that

"the Bank's supervisory approach to BCCI was in my opinion deficient".

Further in the report, he said:

"the Bank did not pursue the truth about BCCI with the rigour which BCCI's market reputation justified".

Lord Justice Bingham stated that no action was taken before 1991 to change the structure or management of BCCI, despite representations having been made to the Bank about fraudulent conduct within BCCI throughout the 1980s, and despite evidence having been presented to the Bank by the Foreign Office and the intelligence services. Lord Justice Bingham painted a picture of a Bank of England whose employees failed to communicate properly with each other, that disregarded and misplaced evidence that was being fed into it, that had a laid-back and relaxed attitude to the tasks in hand and that was incapable of acting decisively, despite having all the information before it.

Lord Justice Bingham's report stated that the Bank's attitude towards a 1988 incident, in which BCCI was linked to drug traffickers, was

"so off-hand as to suggest a lack of interest."

Elsewhere in the report, again and again, the Bank was found to have

"failed to live up to the task."

Such conduct was totally unacceptable then, and it is totally unacceptable now. No disciplinary action of any type has been taken against any employee of the Bank of England.

I should add that the full story of the Bingham report has not yet been told, as some of the appendices have been withheld from the public.

Mr. Tyrie: What does all that have to do with the Bill?

Mr. Vaz: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman has not read the Bill. He will see that the Bill deals with transfer of regulatory functions from the Bank of England. My speech therefore has absolutely everything to do with the Bill. Had he been in the Chamber for the opening speeches—

Mr. Tyrie: I was.

Mr. Vaz: —the hon. Gentleman will have heard the Chief Secretary to the Treasury refer specifically to BCCI and Barings and the need for independent regulation.

I ask my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury to deal in her reply with the previous Government's decision to refuse to publish the confidential memorandums and appendices to the Bingham report. I do not want to put her on the spot, because I know that she will want to consider the matter carefully. In consultation with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, will she, please, consider the possibility of publishing that confidential information? It is not often that I find myself in total agreement with the liquidators of BCCI. At today's meeting in the House, however, they called for publication of the report. I hope that the Government will consider doing so.

I should like to pay tribute to those who have been involved in the campaign over the past six years. I pay tribute to Dr. Elias, who is chairman of the depositors protection association; Bernard Clarke, who has been advising the liquidation committee; and, most recently, Mr. Paul Lehmann and Mr. Jonathan Hirshler, both of whom are involved in trying to get justice.

I must also mention the position of BCCI employees. Hon. Members who can cast their minds back to 5 July 1991 will know that the then Governor of the Bank of England, who had supervisory jurisdiction over the bank, described the employees of BCCI as part of a "criminal culture". As a result of that statement, many of the ex-employees, who were not involved in any way in the fraud, have found it extremely difficult to obtain employment.

The Bingham report and its appendices are now history, but the Bank's conduct over BCCI is not. It is clear that the previous Administration failed to learn the lessons of Bingham. Norman Lamont, who was Chancellor at the time of publication of the report and who lost his seat on 1 May, told the House that Lord Justice Bingham said:

"the Bank of England's general approach to supervision has served this country well"—[*Official Report*, 22 October 1992; Vol. 212, c. 580.]

Mr. Lamont also agreed with the recommendation that a radical recasting of the legal structure of banking supervision would not be appropriate. It is important to note that that was the policy pursued by the Conservative party for a number of years, which is why we greatly welcome the Bill and the fact that there is going to be a change.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who makes fleeting appearances in the Chamber, said in 1995 that we had one of the best regulatory systems in the world. I do not agree, and nor do the Government, which is why the Bill has been introduced.

Mr. Loughton: This is all very interesting, and many of us have heard it many times before, but could the hon. Gentleman suggest how the successor to the Bank of England in this aspect of regulation—the Financial Services Authority—might do a better job, given that it will be an exceptionally bureaucratic, large and expensive organisation, which will take several years to get its act together? How does the hon. Gentleman think that the FSA will make a better fist of it than he claims the Bank of England has done in recent years?

Mr. Vaz: The hon. Gentleman has not heard what I have to say, because he was not a Member of Parliament when I last spoke about BCCI. He has not been able to follow the argument. Clearly, the Bill will enable people who put their faith in British banks, and who therefore deposit their money in British banks, to know that there is an independent regulatory and supervisory authority.

My point is that the collusion between the previous Government and the Governor of the Bank of England, which was not independent, enabled meetings to take place about BCCI, and stopped an independent view being taken of the problems with BCCI. Had there not been that collusion, and had there been independent and proper regulation, BCCI would not have closed.

Mr. Loughton: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. The fact that I was not here when he last spoke about BCCI does not mean that I am not aware of what he said. How does he think that the FSA will be more independent of the Chancellor than the Bank of England was?

Mr. Vaz: The FSA is a new organisation which will be concentrating on supervising banks, and it will have the regulatory power to do so. With the greatest respect, I have to say that the involvement of the then Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, now the Governor, and all his officials at the Bank meant that there was not the necessary independence. The Bank did not have the necessary credibility to supervise BCCI properly. The hon. Gentleman has obviously not been listening to what I said. Had there been proper supervision, the mistakes that were made over BCCI would not have occurred.

I welcome the Bill. I know that it will make a great deal of difference, not only to the credibility of the way in which this country supervises its banks but to the thousands of depositors—the 1.2 million account holders—who looked to Britain and to the Bank of England properly to supervise a bank like BCCI. Of course, the Bill has come far too late for the victims, who will have to wait at least 10 years for the liquidation to be completed, but it is not too late for all the others who may be caught in exactly the same situation.

8.14 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I want to talk primarily about part III of the Bill, which has attracted very little attention. I suspect that that is because it is less politically sexy, or perhaps it is just too complicated. However, it covers some important matters which need to be debated now, before the Bill goes into Committee. In general, my party supports the Bill, as we favour operational independence for the Bank of England and the idea of statutory uniform regulation. Within that broad framework, however, many questions still need to be answered.

I shall maintain the flow of the debate on the management of monetary policy and take up some of the issues that have not yet been dealt with properly. I tried to intervene in the speech of the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who has left the Chamber. She perpetuated a fallacy that has been repeated several times. She tried to link the conduct of monetary policy with long-term investment and growth decisions.

The simple fact is that the Bank of England, whether or not it is independent, has responsibility solely for short-term interest rates. Long-term interest rates, which are what really matter for the cost of capital in business and which influence long-term investment decisions, are set not by the Bank of England or the Government but in the markets. Governments can influence them only indirectly.

Long-term interest rates are set in international markets but can be affected by expectations of inflation. It is the ability of an independent central bank to maintain low and stable inflation which gives low long-term interest rates. That is what matters for investment and growth, and that is why the Bill is so important.

On the issue of central bank independence, I have a query about the link between this debate and our eventual entry into economic and monetary union. As the

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

Government know, we support their broad approach to EMU, but we are critical of the fact that they have passed up the opportunity for early entry. That will present some tricky transitional problems for an independent Bank of England.

Those problems were graphically outlined in the interviews given by Mr. Duisenberg yesterday in the United Kingdom. He said that other countries in Europe would maintain close scrutiny of the United Kingdom's policy over the next few years should we wish to join EMU. They will scrutinise our policy closely not only in respect of inflation, which has converged very well, or of interest rates, but also of exchange rates.

Whether or not we join the exchange rate mechanism, we will be expected later in this Parliament to maintain exchange rate stability. Given that there is no reference whatsoever to nominal or real exchange rate stability, it is not at all clear from the Bill how the Bank of England will carry out that task and reconcile it with its other task of maintaining low inflation. Some clarification of this problem, which has arisen as a result of delayed entry, needs to be provided.

My frustration with the Bill and with some of the documentation that led to it—for example, the Large report—is that it is very much concerned with institutions and procedures. I recall an anecdote involving the former Prime Minister, James Callaghan. He spent a long time with civil servants who were describing a complex administrative reorganisation. With some frustration he said, "I can see the harness, but where is the horse?" The horse in this debate is the basic philosophy which will govern the regulation of the financial sector. It is not clear what the Government's thinking is, and we should be grateful for some guidance.

We could caricature two possible ways forward. The first is that regulation proceeds in a permissive way which respects the flow of markets: in the retail market, it observes the principle of caveat emptor; in the wholesale market, it allows competition between institutions and allows bankruptcy for banks and other institutions. We know the dangers of that approach. Emptors are ripped off by vendors, as the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) has just described. If institutions are allowed to collapse, there is a danger of a collective, systemic collapse. That is why we do not endorse a totally permissive approach.

However, it is possible to steer too far in the other direction. An over-regulated system presents its own problems of inflexibility and stifling initiative. We have seen examples in east Asia in recent months of the dangers of an over-regulated banking system, which perpetuates bad lending. We hope that the system of regulation that emerges from the new institutional arrangement is flexible and market oriented, which will allow more competition.

If we are to be satisfied that the Government's proposals are the way forward, they must address various issues. The first, which has not been answered, was raised by the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell). What does the lender of last resort facility mean? At what point does the Bank of England intervene and according to what criteria? That is all buried in the memorandum of understanding. Whether the central bank intervenes too frequently or not at all is of enormous importance.

We also need clarification on the cost of regulation. The Bill says that the cost will rise from £30 million to £50 million as a result of the FSA inheriting the overheads of the Bank of England. However, there are other estimates. Coopers and Lybrand, which is a reputable organisation, has talked about a £200 million a year cost for regulation. I have no way of knowing whether that estimate is correct, but there may be a ballooning cost. If that happens, it will have a considerable effect on the operational efficiency of financial institutions, particularly small boutique institutions serving private clients as investors. Many such organisations could not afford the cost of monitoring complex regulation, and would be driven out of business, leaving large institutions to dominate. We need answers to such questions.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is perhaps best covered by the dreadful word globalisation. To his credit, the Chief Secretary acknowledged the extent to which we are dealing with internationally integrated financial markets. He is the only contributor to the debate to have mentioned the international dimension. The Large report is entirely about regulation in one country and does not refer to international aspects. We are dealing with a highly integrated market. That involves not just the links between different banks. Any investor can now lock into electronic systems and take a broker in the United States as well as here. National systems of regulation increasingly make little sense.

We must have clarity on how the international dimensions will be handled. The Chief Secretary made passing reference to that, but he did not mention that probably one of the most important international institutions at present is the Bank for International Settlements, which prevents collective collapse in the banking system. It is not clear from what has been said so far whether that will remain the responsibility of the Bank of England or be transferred to the new regulator.

What will happen to our participation in the International Organisation of Securities Commissions, which is another key international institution designed to prevent collective collapse in the securities markets? There is an important international dimension to regulation which has not been properly covered.

My final point relates to a specific aspect of financial markets that affects ordinary individuals more than any other—mortgages. We have heard about the impact of interest rates, but the Bill is important in another sense. There have been big changes in the home loans market. Banks have become building societies, and building societies have become banks. One of the main structural changes in the past year is the disappearance of large numbers of mutually owned institutions. That is a matter of great concern for many Labour Members and for me.

Representations have been made to the Economic Secretary to get her to have a fresh look at the system of regulation that she inherited under the Building Societies Act 1997. I know that the issue may be more appropriate to the legislation that will succeed the Bill, but there is some urgency, because mutual institutions may have disappeared before the next batch of legislation comes forward. Will the Government be receptive to an amendment to the Bill to allow stricter regulations on mutual conversions?

I received a fax this morning containing an internet guide to carpetbagging, which illustrates the extent to which abuses are taking place, permitting the asset stripping of institutions. The situation needs to be addressed urgently. I wonder whether the Government would be prepared to use the Bill as a vehicle for that.

The Bill provides a good structure, which we support in principle. However, as in so many other cases, everything depends on the small print. We shall criticise those aspects of the Bill with which we disagree.

8.25 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I want to try to give a good Labour speech, rather like that given earlier by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer. I regret the fact that, while the first act of the Labour Government in 1945 was to nationalise the Bank of England, the first act of the Labour Government in 1997 was to give the Bank of England independent control over the most important lever of economic management.

I have no quarrel with the regulatory parts of the Bill, because the Bank of England had too many roles—none of which it performed well—to be an effective regulator. We have been reminded of its deplorable record on BCCI, Barings and Johnson Matthey. I read an article in *The Sun* a few years back and wondered how an organisation that could not stop its staff taking used bank notes home in their knickers until there were 14 cars parked outside the home of the used bank note taker could be an effective regulator. That is only an aside. Chaps regulating chaps did not work and does not work. It is as well that we are ending it—slightly too late for my preference, but it should be ended.

I want to concentrate on independent control of interest rates, based on criteria that deal only with inflation, taking no account of employment, growth and all the other important factors for the performance of a Government. Inflation is a dead enemy. It is not going to resume. We are using a nuclear weapon to destroy a phenomenon that is dead anyway. That is overkill.

The policy is justified by non sequiturs. The argument is that stability creates the conditions for growth. That is not true. There is no causal relationship between low inflation and growth, although it is clear that higher growth leads to a quickening of inflation, because inflation is a symptom of life. We need some inflation. If we got growth to 5 per cent.—which is not very high—inflation would go over the 2.5 per cent. target at which the Bank is instructed to aim. The Bank would therefore have to kill high growth, which seems disastrous.

The economy is being fitted into a monetarist corset, rather like those impregnable Spirella corsets that used to be advertised in newspapers when I was a teenager and noticed such things. After years of slow growth, the economy needs a substantial boost. It is easy to get stability and low inflation—they can be found in graveyards. The only two periods of stable prices that I know of in recent economic history were in Salazar's Portugal and during the five years up to 1929 before the great crash in the United States. Neither case suggests that price stability and low inflation are of any great benefit to the economy.

There is no evidence on whether an independent central bank is better at dealing with inflation. That is a fad, not a fact. The best authority on the issue is a book by Eijffinger and de Haan. Their conclusions, which appear to be common sense, are that

"a country with an independent central bank will, ceteris paribus,"—

which they never are—

"have a lower rate of inflation than will a country where politicians can steer the central bank's policy."

However, the study compares a list of countries comprising the Philippines, Brazil and various south American economies with examples such as Germany where low inflation is inevitable because of its powerful industrial base, so it proves nothing.

The study continues:

"Most empirical studies, however, show that central-bank autonomy does not enhance economic growth . . . Indeed, most studies suggest that central-bank independence is associated with higher disinflation costs."

The evidence from the best study of such matters shows that central banks overkill and clobber the economy, and that their management of the economy produces deeper recessions.

Television commentators and the Bank of England trot out the monetarist myth that a slight increase in interest rates now will produce lower inflation later, as if it were a scientific law—but that is not the case. Higher interest rates increase the value of the pound and make imports cheaper, thus dealing with inflation. They also make exports dearer and put people out of work, thus dealing with wage inflation. Essentially, they clobber the manufacturing economy and put people out of work as a means of restraining inflation. It is rather like trying to maintain an expensive car by bashing the carburettor with an enormous great hammer.

Bank of England management is the opposite of stable. In a world of floating exchange rates, any increase in interest affects the exchange rate. The uncertain prospects for monetary union in Europe, which may or may not happen—the position may be wide, narrow, soft or hard—affect conditions here. Investors are attracted to Britain by higher interest rates, but repelled by the uncertainties in Europe.

Giving the Bank of England—which has no higher wisdom in facing any problem than to put up interest rates—independent power over interest rates inevitably increases the value of the pound, and that has a damaging effect on the economy. Indeed, it will lead to a balance of payments problem, a fall in exports, an increase in imports and a loss of jobs. All that will happen next year, just when the new deal will be coming in to fight inflation and unemployment by micro-policies that will run contrary to the macro-policy enforced by the independent Bank of England.

If Britain is managed by interest rates—which is what the Bank of England is attempting to do—it will be inherently more unstable than most of its competitors, because interest rates are crucial in our economy and most people are on flexible rather than fixed-rate mortgages. Therefore, an increase in interest rates has automatic and substantial effects on the retail prices index and house prices.

One has only to recall what happened in the Lawson boom when interest rates were kept low because we were shadowing the deutschmark. There was an explosion of

[Mr. Austin Mitchell]

credit and economic activity that had to be damped down massively within two years. It was followed by the Major deflation, when interest rates rose too high, leading to deep recession. We have disproportionate fluctuations as a result of the importance of interest rates in our economy. Therefore, interest rate management that is designed to produce stability instead produces instability in the economy.

The Bank of England is not a repository of abstract wisdom and scientific knowledge about inflation. It is a vested interest in respect of finance, the City, housing and bankers, unleavened by the interests of manufacturing, which has been deeply damaged by the Bank's role in the economy, or the interests of the regions, which should be represented in the court and in our monetary policy.

We need a Monetary Policy Committee composed of diverse economic interests, but instead we have clapped-out monetarists, Keynesians turned monetarist and then turned halfway back again into budding new Keynesians, and foreigners with curious backgrounds, as I read in *The Observer*. We need a diversity of economic viewpoints—labour economists, Keynesian economists and expansionary economists—rather than just monetarists.

Finance is implicitly interested in dear money. The philosophy is to pile it high and sell it dear—quite unlike that of the supermarkets. Currently, the real interest rates are at record levels. In the 1970s and part of the 1980s, the real interest rate was actually negative, so people could afford to invest. Indeed, there was an incentive to do so. Now, with inflation at 2.8 per cent. and the interest rate at 7.5 per cent., the real interest rate is at a record level. That is a direct, damaging penalty on investment. The Bank of England and the banking community has an interest in high interest rates and a high, stable exchange rate. However, they do not represent the interests of manufacturers, which remain the drive motor of our economy and generate jobs.

A misguided decision based on myths and inaccurate information, carried out at the wrong time—just when it can do maximum damage to the economy—made the Bank of England independent on interest rate policy. That brings me to my basic argument against the entire Bill: it destroys democratic accountability.

All sides of the argument have been exaggerated today. Those in favour of the Bill have defended it, and exaggerated its benefits, saying that it will provide stability. People such as me might be inclined to exaggerate the penalties—although, frankly, I think not. Even if the Bill's effect in making interest rates and the exchange rate higher than they would otherwise have been and growth a little slower than it would otherwise have been is marginal, there will be damaging consequences for the British economy. We can argue about that, but the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. The people elect the Government to run the economy for their purposes—betterment, enrichment, jobs and growth. If those purposes are not achieved, the people can throw the Government out.

The Government are now giving up power to an oligarchy whose interests point in the opposite direction from those of the people. It will not remove blame from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We saw that after the Budget, when he was blamed for not reducing demand by increasing taxes. It will not make him blameless—simply less powerful. We shall transform ourselves from one-club golfing, which was the approach of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, to no-club golfing.

If the Government are committed to not increasing taxes and they do not control monetary policy, how will they manage the economy without the fiscal or the monetary weapon? Democratic, accountable government needs to have both those weapons and to use them for the purposes of the people, which are different from the purposes of bankers. The people want economic management to provide jobs, growth, a maximisation of living standards and betterment. Because it reduces our ability to achieve those objectives and follow the purposes of the people in economic policy, I cannot vote for the Bill.

8.38 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood) on an excellent maiden speech. I hope that we shall hear more from him in future.

I shall keep my remarks brief, as I am keen to hear the debate among Labour Members on a matter that obviously divides them deeply.

The Chancellor's decision to give the Bank of England independence over interest rates will prove to be the Government's first major policy error, and it occurred within four days of the new Labour Government coming to office. It has resulted in the abandonment of a monetary and economic policy that has yielded the best inflationary record for 50 years, low and falling unemployment, and steady growth. It has removed from direct control and accountability a principal lever of economic policy. As Robert Chote—who has been quoted many times tonight—the economics editor of the *Financial Times*, wrote in his excellent paper for the Social Market Foundation, an independent Bank of England

"will weaken democratic control over a vital area of public policy."

Monetary policy, and the conduct of monetary policy, has such a fundamental effect on people's lives and is so fundamental a part of economic policy that it has to be in the hands of those elected to office.

The Bill will divorce monetary policy making from fiscal policy making. It will result in higher than necessary interest rates, with all the consequences for mortgages, for the competitiveness of British business and for higher unemployment.

By giving the Bank of England independence on interest rates, the Government are signing up to the latest fashionable, quick-fix panacea. All the panaceas that Governments have adopted over many decades—the gold standard in the 1920s and 1930s, the parity with the dollar in the 1940s, the Bretton Woods arrangement and, most recently, the exchange rate mechanism—have ended in failure. There is no short cut to the successful management of the economy, which is difficult and sometimes requires unpopular policies.

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford): The United States and all the other nations in the European Union have separated fiscal control from their

Governments for some years. Why have all those countries performed better than we have in the past 18 years?

Mr. Gibb: I shall come back to that point in a minute, but France and Germany currently have levels of unemployment that are twice as high as ours. The Conservative Government, by adopting a balance between sensible monetary and fiscal policies, achieved a steady and stable economy. Any number of trendy panaceas proposed and adopted by the present Government will not change that truth.

I acknowledge that the immediate effect of giving the Bank of England control over interest rates was to reduce the premium between short-term and long-term interest rates. However, that premium had built up since the war because Britain has been plagued by periods of high inflation, mostly brought on by previous Labour Governments. The Government faced a choice between a quick-fix panacea, which would reduce the premium in the short term but at a cost to growth and employment, and a long-term commitment to conducting monetary and fiscal policy in such a way as to demonstrate that Britain has at last become a stable, low-inflation economy. They have gone for the quick fix. The previous Conservative Government opted for, and delivered, long-term stability.

The various studies that have been trumpeted by the very few supporters of the Bill who have spoken today show that countries with an independent central bank have lower average inflation rates than countries that do not. I acknowledge that. The Harvard Institute of Economic Research showed, for example, that countries with central banks with the most independence—Switzerland, Germany and the USA—had an average inflation rate of less than 4 per cent. between 1951 and 1988. Those countries with central banks with the least independence—Spain, Australia and the United Kingdom—had average inflation rates of 7 per cent. during that time.

However, as the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) said, when she opposed the Government's policy in an Adjournment debate:

"although there may be a statistical relationship between central bank independence and low inflation, no causal relationship can be established."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1055.]

She repeated that comment today. That view is backed up by Michael Jenkins of Hull university, who has commented that there is no statistically significant relationship between high central bank independence and low inflation.

I come to the cost of the policy. It is not the lack of a causal link that prompts my opposition to the Bill. Those countries with independent central banks have experienced much deeper recessions than those without, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) pointed out. He quoted the academics Sylvester Eijffinger and Jakob de Haan, who have studied the point in great detail. They cite five studies of central banks, four of which show that, for any given reduction in inflationary pressure, the deflationary cost is higher in those countries with independent central banks than in those without.

Another academic study in 1994 by Guy Debelle and Stanley Fischer showed that since 1962 those countries with independent central banks have suffered deeper recessions, on average, than those without. The countries with independent central banks did not enjoy higher growth levels, despite the high social costs of the recessions, so there was no compensatory rise in growth in the long term.

The reason for that phenomenon is plain. If a Government give a central bank the duty to meet an inflation target, that is what it will do. Any idiot can eliminate inflation from an economy by pushing interest rates sky high, oblivious to the consequences for growth and unemployment. A successful manager of an economy has to secure a balance between low inflation and economic growth. As Stanley Fischer has pointed out:

"An important reason to expose central bankers to elected officials is that, just as the latter may have an inflationary bias, the former may easily develop a deflationary bias. Shielded as they are from public opinion, cocooned within an anti-inflationary temple, central bankers can all too easily deny that cyclical unemployment can be reduced by easing monetary policy."

That over-deflationary bias has been the experience of the Bank of England since before 1 May. In November 1995, for example, the Governor proposed a 0.5 per cent. rise in interest rates to combat what the Bank saw as incipient inflationary pressure in the economy. That rise was opposed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and, 18 months later, his opposition has been proved correct.

Since the election, evidence of over-deflationary bias has been still more manifest. In six months, we have seen five interest rate rises—empirical evidence that independent central banks are more prone to set higher and excessive rates of interest than those that are not independent, because the incentives exist for them to do so. The Government acknowledged that fact soon after their announcement, on 6 May, of their decision to give the Bank independence. A few weeks later, the Chancellor revised his proposals.

Mr. Geraint Davies: The hon. Gentleman asserted that the five rises in interest rates since the election were caused by independence being given to the Bank of England. He has no counter-factual evidence to suggest that interest rates would not have been higher under political control. The shadow Chancellor has no view on that, because he and the Conservative party do not know what the rate should be. In essence, he said, "This situation is awful, but I don't know what we would do." To suggest that the rises are a function of independence is rubbish—they are a market response to the current economic conditions.

Mr. Gibb: The Government and the Chancellor say that it is the Bank's responsibility to determine interest rates, but now the hon. Gentleman is saying that the Chancellor is in favour of the five rises in interest rates since the general election.

The Chancellor revised his original proposals, announced on 6 May, a few weeks later, seemingly in response to the criticism, which was abounding, that they would lead to excessive interest rates. He relaxed his inflation target and brought in a lower parameter below which the Bank was not allowed to let inflation stray. None the less, the deflationary instinct remains, as evidenced by last Thursday's interest rate rise, which was not widely acclaimed in the City.

[Mr. Gibb]

That instinct will be institutionalised by the way in which the Bill is drafted. Clause 11 proposes:

"the objectives of the Bank of England shall be—

(a) to maintain price stability and

(b) subject to that, to support the economic policy of Her Majesty's Government".

That appears to be copying the objectives of the Bundesbank. The 1957 Bundesbank law says that the Bundesbank shall regulate the volume of money in circulation and of credit supplied to the economy with the aim of safeguarding the currency.

Section 12 of the Bundesbank law adds that the Bundesbank shall be required to support the general economic policies of the Federal Government. The same word "support" is used. That vague imperative to have regard to the general economic policy of the Government clearly has not worked well in recent years in Germany, where unemployment is more than 12 per cent., compared with 5.5 per cent. in Britain. Anatole Kaletsky argued in *The Times* in June that the very independence of the Bundesbank has led to the prolonged recession in Germany for the past few years.

The United States, on the other hand, has a different model. The Federal Reserve Act of 1913 provides that the Federal Reserve shall conduct its operations

"with a view to accommodating commerce and business."

In 1978, the Humphrey-Hawkings Act specifically set the Federal Reserve the dual target of full employment and price stability.

We are talking about something more fundamental than merely the structure of the objectives of an independent central bank, however. The principal reason for the success of the Federal Reserve in recent years is that the Fed is chaired by Alan Greenspan, a man who consistently gets it right. If another individual with a different view of the way in which monetary policy should be set had taken his position, the chances are that the Federal Reserve might not have been so successful. However, one cannot legislate for an Alan Greenspan. Monetary policy is not an exact science.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said in the Adjournment debate on the subject in June:

"Setting interest rate objectives requires feel, touch and sensitivity."—[*Official Report*, 11 June 1997; Vol. 295, c. 1073.]

Even more than that, however, interest rate judgment depends on how potent an effect one believes an interest rate rise or fall will have on the economy. That is very much a political view.

Whether an independent central bank will be successful depends on the composition of the Monetary Policy Committee and on the Governor. That is fine if things go well, but what happens if they go wrong? Because one cannot pass a law to ensure that the Bank gets monetary policy right; because the mechanics of interest rate policy are still the subject of political debate; and because handing that over to an independent bank will not stop interest rate policy being the subject of political debate, it is essential that such decisions remain in the hands of those elected to office, who are accountable and can be turfed out by the electorate if they get it wrong.

The key to maintaining a low-inflation economy is to have a low-inflation culture. To create that, one needs the backing of the British people. We can have any number of independent institutions which are crafted and structured in any way we wish, but if the support of the people is not there, the central bank will not succeed. As Robert Chote says:

"Central banks will only succeed in delivering low inflation if they reflect fundamental support for price stability in society."

It is important that, when people go to the polls, they understand that they need to elect politicians for whom low inflation as a principal object of economic policy.

In a free and democratic society, people must have the ability to determine the economic policy of this country, whether they are right or wrong. That is what the Government want to avoid. They realise that, given Labour's instinct for economic mismanagement, people will not vote for a Labour Government unless that Government hand over their conduct of the economy to someone else—anyone else.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): There is not a single word that my hon. Friend has uttered so far with which I have disagreed. Is not this Bill—although bad and damaging—but a halfway house? Following the logic of my hon. Friend's thesis, is it not an interim step to the wholesale abandonment of the power to control British monetary policy and interest rates outwith the United Kingdom altogether—to a European central bank that we do not elect and cannot remove?

Mr. Gibb: I agree with every word that my hon. Friend says. The decision to join a single currency is part and parcel of the desire to hand over to somebody else—anybody else—economic decisions that the Government know they cannot trust themselves to take. That is why they went on about their promise not to raise taxes. That is why they made such a song and dance about sticking to Conservative spending plans. That is why the first thing that the Chancellor did was to give up his right to conduct monetary policy. Even new Labour does not trust new Labour.

There was not a single word in the Labour party manifesto about giving independence to the Bank of England. It merely said:

"We will reform the Bank of England to ensure that decision making on monetary policy is more effective, open, accountable and free from short-term political manipulation."

Despite what the Economic Secretary said earlier, that does not mean giving the Bank of England independence. There is not a hint in that phrase about a plan which, in the words of the Prime Minister, is the

"biggest step in economic policy making in Britain since world war two."

Today, we are debating a Bill which the people did not vote for and did not expect—but that is typical of what we have come to expect from the Government. During the election, the Prime Minister wrapped himself in the Union Jack to demonstrate his Eurosceptic credentials; yet within six months, his Government have pledged themselves to take Britain into a single currency. Within four months, the Government have allowed through at two successive ECOFIN meetings a paper on European Union tax harmonisation proposals.

The Labour party challenged every reduction in unemployment over four consecutive years of the last Tory Government by challenging the basis of the figures. Since the election, the Labour Government have done nothing to revise or change the basis of those figures. The Government were elected on a pledge to bring unemployment down further—that is the whole basis of their economic policy, we are told. But every major economic decision taken by the Government since the election is designed, whether deliberately or not, to increase unemployment.

The decision to give the Bank of England independence is leading to excessive rises in interest rates, which will, in due course, lead to unemployment increasing. The Budget and the Finance Act will take £10 billion out of the economy. The Government have signed up to the social chapter and proposed the introduction of a minimum wage, all of which will lead to job losses.

On 20 May, the Chancellor stated that the introduction of an independent Bank of England and the appointment of a Monetary Policy Committee would be scrutinised by the Treasury Committee. I searched in vain through the Bill for even one reference to the Treasury Committee. Why is that? Are we meant to rely, for the only piece of democratic accountability in this whole undemocratic arrangement, on a statement in a letter from the Chancellor?

The Chancellor also said that the Bank of England could use its own separate foreign exchange reserves to intervene in the money markets. How can we be sure that the Bank will conduct those operations for domestic purposes rather than for exchange rate stability? What is the Government's policy on exchange rate?

The late Lord Ridley, in his autobiography, opposed an independent Bank of England, writing:

"For what purpose would they use interest rate policy? In order to try to secure an artificial exchange rate, or to control the domestic money supply? The Bank of England is well known for its attachment to interfering with the exchange rate, and could never be trusted to operate interest rate policy for the sole purpose of domestic stability."

What is the Government's strategy, and can the Bank of England be so trusted?

The Government's rhetoric is of openness, but they announced the independence of the Bank of England on 6 May, the day before Parliament assembled. Was that so urgent that it had to be dealt with on a Monday rather than a Tuesday? The Government trumpeted their introduction of a green Budget and draft legislation for consultation, but took the biggest step in economic decision making since the war with no consultation or debate, before any announcement to the House.

The Chancellor may be a close ally of the Prime Minister's, but in his six months in office he has made a series of political decisions that will do our economy enormous damage: the decision to give the Bank of England independence; the £5 billion smash-and-grab raid on Britain's pension funds; and the decision to take Britain into the single currency after the next general election. Those are the Government's three most damaging decisions since the general election; they were all made by the Chancellor and will all, I believe, lead the Labour party to lose office at the next general election. I urge the House to vote against the first of them this evening.

9 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke (Norwich, South): I strongly support the Bill. I want to talk about the accountability of the Bank, on which the Treasury Committee has reported, and, in particular, to reject everything the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) said. I was glad that he spoke with such brevity—to allow the full involvement of Labour Members.

I also reject the assertion of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) that the Bill would create a less transparent and open system of fixing monetary policy. I profoundly disagree, and I hope to explain why.

We in Norwich have a specific interest in financial services. Norwich Union has its headquarters there, as does Virgin Direct with the new Virgin One bank account and Sedgwick's insurance brokers. They employ many people in my constituency. They want a stable economy with low inflation and transparent and open economic decision making so that they know where they stand. I believe that the Bill will supply that, and that is why I support it.

There is concern in Norwich—as elsewhere—about the fact that monetary decisions can be taken according to the febrile concerns of the marketplace in the City rather than as a result of being rooted in the real needs of the economy, and that there is sometimes a mystical approach to monetary policy making that ignores economic realities.

One of my constituents, who is regularly consulted by the regional agents of the Bank of England, said that he was concerned that decisions might be, and are, taken in the City without consideration of the impact on the price of the green pound or the consequences of the windfalls in Norwich as a result of Norwich Union's conversion. I believe that the Bill will allow those concerns to be dealt with.

Other countries manage in different ways. The Bundesbank and the Federal Reserve have well-established systems of taking into account the real economy. There are different constitutional devices reflecting countries' different constitutions.

The Treasury Committee addressed the issue and came to the central conclusion:

"We believe that by bringing information into the public domain we can help to clarify the issues and that rigorous scrutiny of the basis for policy decisions will enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the monetary policy framework as a whole."

I believe that that is fundamentally right and that that is what we are trying to achieve.

In his evidence to the Select Committee, the Chief Secretary stated:

"maximum transparency and openness in policy making . . . will add to the Government's credibility"—

any Government's credibility—

"and in turn will lead to a reduction in the premium we have to pay currently in terms of interest rates."

I believe that those principles are right, and that is why the Bill is right.

Our Select Committee sought to set out in its report how transparency and openness could be developed. I want to explain clearly what the Committee is saying. First, we will require the Chancellor to give clear evidence in the public domain about the basis of the clarification

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

and instruction that he gives, as set out in clause 12. He will be required to explain, directly and openly, not quietly and secretly, how he deals with the economic shocks mentioned earlier by the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe.

The Chancellor will be required to specify why, for example, he chooses a point target for inflation rather than a range; why he takes one measure, such as RPIX, rather than another; why he chooses a particular figure, such as the present 2.5 per cent. plus or minus one; and what general period the target should be met within. If he uses his powers under clause 19 to override the Bank, he will have to explain why he has done so and how he is doing it.

One of the most ludicrous assertions that have been made tonight is the suggestion that the motive behind the Bill is to allow the Chancellor to shift responsibility to the Bank. He could not begin to do that. All Chancellors take responsibility for the inflation target they set and for the structure and framework of monetary policy. They are accountable for that to the House and to the Treasury Committee. The idea that the Chancellor might think that he can get rid of it and give it to Eddie George is ludicrous. That is not the motive that lies behind the Bill or the motive of the Chancellor, and the suggestion that it is is wrong. The accountability of the Chancellor that I have described is the clearest possible demonstration that the Government retain full responsibility for the key indicators of economic policy, including monetary policy. It is right that they should, and right that they are accountable for it.

On the Bank, the Treasury Committee proposes a range of measures to bring into the public arena policy considerations and policy areas that have never been there before. I pay tribute to the former Chancellor, who is in his place, for some of the steps that he took to move that on with the inflation report, the publication of minutes and so on. The Bill seeks to take that further and bring more into the public arena.

Hon. Members asked who would give evidence. Of course the Governor will give evidence and of course we want all members of the Monetary Policy Committee to be interviewed from time to time. If there was a division in the minutes, we would take evidence about why MPC members took different views. We are seeking to take evidence about the role of the court. There is a series of areas within the Bank's decision taking, and different people with different responsibilities in respect of which we hope that views and conduct of affairs will be open.

What will the Committee do? First, we have stated—I believe that this can be achieved—that we will require the Bank to clarify its assumptions on matters such as foreign interest rates, the exchange rate, domestic and international growth and, critically, the relationship between interest rate movements and the real economy. With all credit to the former Chancellor, those areas and assumptions have not been in the public arena before, but they will be now. That will enhance the public debate about the conduct of economic policy.

The Committee set out explicitly that we would require the Bank to provide in its main inflation report an annual statement of the transmission mechanisms that it believes operate in the relationship between monetary policy and inflation. That is an important area: many assertions and ideas are discussed in various ways. We are saying that we want it out in the open every year so that we can examine the assumptions that have been made.

On the open letter process, if there is any deviation from the target that is set, there will be full evidence, full hearings and full understanding in the full public arena. There will be hearings on the inflation report, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) said, at least twice a year—and probably more often—to draw out the full picture. If we have the reserve powers allowed for in clause 19, there will be every opportunity to air the matter fully in the public arena. The Committee's report also mentions that we are seeking an annual debate on this issue in the House. The process will greatly increase transparency and openness, and will add to the credibility of the Bank.

I am short of time and am coming up against the deadline. I had hoped to comment on the confirmatory hearings. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that they are not a requirement for the Committee to be able to operate in the way I described, but proper confirmatory hearings would enhance the Committee's work.

In conclusion, I urge hon. Members to read paragraphs 47 and 49 of our report, where we set out how confirmatory hearings can be conducted carefully and effectively without the worst practices of the congressional system. Such hearings would enhance the system. The Chief Secretary generously told our Select Committee that he had an open mind on that matter. I genuinely hope that, even with this Bill, he will have an open mind when considering amendments in that area.

9.10 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): This hotch-potch privatisation—the independence of the Bank of England—will, like the Chancellor's Budget, soon lose its initial popularity. If we are to have an independent central bank, let us do it properly like the Federal Reserve and have proper, full and open accountability and let those who are responsible be properly serviced and have objectives that cover the full range of economic activity, not merely over-narrow, anti-inflation objectives.

The Government are claiming that there is some democratic accountability in the Bill and that they are opting for a midway house—the best that Britain can do at this stage. In that case, I cannot understand why the Chancellor is so keen on the proposed arrangements for the European central bank. That will be the worst sort of independent central bank arrangement—a bank that is not in any way democratically accountable and that leaves the door wide open for all the dangers that the hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) described so well. My great fear is that the ECB will be besotted with the desire to make the euro a strong reserve currency when Europe already has a large trade surplus. Over-valuation will result, and we will have Japanese-style deflationary and stagnatory problems.

My main concerns relate to the dangers that will face Europe, given the coming climate. The proposals for how the Bank of England is to manage banking problems are weak. At the starting point, there are signs of misunderstanding. The Chancellor pointed out in the early summer that it was frightfully important that the

management of interest rates should be purely for inflation control and should not be contaminated by other factors. Was he not aware that in America, for example, this very decade, interest rates had to be managed to be low for quite some time in order to rebuild the capital base of the banking system, which had been ravaged by the previous recession? Was he not aware that the same situation obtained in Japan? Interest rate policy and being lender of last resort is a crucial part of a central bank's job in managing the overall stability of the banking system.

My great fear is that the debt deflation and the competitive devaluations in the Asian economies will blow a nasty cold wind to the mature economies of America and Europe. The climate will be extremely difficult for the banking system. It is worrying that responsibility is not clearly laid out in those areas. One cannot have a central bank that might have to take large decisions against the background of systemic problems when responsibilities are not clearly laid down.

To know what to do with particular banks, the Bank of England has to have responsibility for monitoring them, yet that power has now been sent off to the FSA. It is noteworthy that Alan Greenspan pointed out when the proposals were made that, in his opinion, it was extremely unwise to separate the responsibility for monitoring the banking system from overall responsibility for maintaining stability.

The arrangements have not been clearly organised in the Bill: the co-ordination arrangements and the process for decisions on when the Bank of England may need to intervene massively to support the banking system and what authority it requires from the Government are not clear. I was around during the 1974 crisis, when many of our largest banks had to be supported by the Bank of England in the lifeboat. The lifeboat was a great tribute to the effectiveness of the Bank during a major systemic crisis. Given the current economic winds, I am greatly concerned that, because of the insufficiently clear and divided responsibilities, we might find that, at the crucial moment, these new and ill-defined arrangements will leave the Bank of England and the banking system ill equipped to deal with problems.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie), I am opposed to the Bill. It does not do the proper professional job required if we are to go down the route of having an independent central bank. If we want to do that, let us do it professionally, like the Federal Reserve. For goodness' sake, let us be extremely wary. There is at least some democratic accountability back to the Treasury Committee, so let us be extremely aware of the risks ahead and get the Bank of England ready to deal with the great dangers that may face our banking system over the next two years.

9.16 pm

Mr. Ross Cranston (Dudley, North): I have only four minutes to make a few points.

I support the Bill without deviation and without hesitation. First, it puts the constitution of the Bank of England on a firm basis. It sets out the mechanisms for accountability that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) described. Secondly, it sets out quite clearly the Bank's status in terms of monetary policy. Opposition Members do not seem to agree on that point—the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) says that we should leave things as they are, but others have said that we should make the Bank completely independent.

Some hon. Members do not seem to have read the Bill, and I include some hon. Friends in that number. Clause 12 makes it clear that the Government set monetary policy; clause 11 makes clear that it is up to the Bank of England to set interest rates to meet the targets that the Government have determined. Under the Bill, the Bank will not be completely independent, but neither will it be completely under political direction. There is a fine balance, and the Government have got it right. The arrangements reflect those in other countries, such in as the Bundesbankgesetz.

Thirdly, the Bill puts financial services on a firm footing. One of the problems that now face us is that, unfortunately, the Conservative Government did not implement properly the Gower report. They set up a range of self-regulatory organisations: we started with seven, reduced that number to five and then got down to four. It was a complete shambles.

Under the Bill, financial services regulation will be brought under a proper umbrella. I am pleased that insurance is to come under that umbrella: current insurance law has not felt the wind of consumer protection, but the Bill puts investor protection in the retail sector to the forefront. I welcome that unreservedly. I support the Bill and I am sure the House will give it its approval.

9.19 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): This most interesting debate has revealed deep cracks in the facade of new Labour. The most notable speeches by Labour Members were made by hon. Members who obviously do not believe that it is one of the tasks of a Labour Government to hand over control of economic policy to bankers, however eminent those bankers may be. Although they are bound to be dismissed as the voice of old Labour by the trendies on the Treasury Bench, they nevertheless represent a more authentic Labour tradition, from which we shall hear much more before this Parliament is out.

More generally, the debate has shown that the Government proposals for a central bank that is independent in this country are not proposals for an independent bank in a real sense. They would be better described as proposals for a quango bank, designed to take unpopular decisions about things such as interest rates, but leaving the powers of appointment, the power to override and many other important powers, in the hands of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government.

As a result, the Bill will not satisfy those who believe in a genuinely independent central bank. They must be pretty numerous on the Labour Benches, because they are now committed in principle to the most independent central bank in the world, to be set up in Frankfurt—the European central bank. That bank, as we heard in the debate, will be forbidden to take any instructions from national Governments or Parliaments, and will not be accountable to any democratic body or institution, anywhere, for the foreseeable future. That is entrenched in treaty law—which is, of course, superior to national law.

The Government, and Labour Members who want the United Kingdom to join a single European currency, have not followed through on that in the Bill, or even taken the

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

halfway step of setting up such a genuinely independent bank for our own purposes, so the Bill will not satisfy those who believe in a genuinely independent central bank. Nor will it satisfy those hon. Members from whom we heard tonight who believe that interest rate decisions should remain in democratically accountable hands. It is a dog's breakfast of a Bill, which will satisfy no one.

Mr. Radice *rose—*

Mr. Nigel Beard (Bexleyheath and Crayford) *rose—*

Mr. Cranston *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I had better give way to the Chairman of the Treasury Select Committee.

Mr. Radice: If it is such a dog's breakfast of a Bill, why do not the Opposition say that they will repeal it if they get into government? If it is so bad, why not repeal it?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That point was dealt with satisfactorily and comprehensively by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley).

The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice) will know, because he was in the previous Parliament and the one before it, that Labour made several ill-judged promises to repeal legislation when it achieved office. There was scarcely a privatisation that was not accompanied by a ringing commitment to renationalise when Labour came back into office. All that has been ditched under the impact of events and reality.

We shall not make the mistake of making knee-jerk reactions and promises to repeal legislation, but we are entitled to draw attention to the deficiencies in the legislation so that we do not need to repeal it, because it will not have become law by receiving a Second Reading. I hope that Labour Members who have spoken against the legislation will join us in the Lobby at 10 o'clock.

Supporters claim that the Bill and the thinking behind it will establish a low-inflation culture in this country, and will commit everyone to the national imperative of low inflation. If that is the case, why did the Chancellor make no effort to consult anyone before he announced, four days after the general election, his intention to hand over powers to the Bank of England? There is nothing about it in the Labour manifesto, apart from a few weasel words about the Bank of England.

As the right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) pointed out, the business manifesto—which is the really important one—contains a commitment to do something else: to set up a statutory advisory committee in the Bank of England. No preparations were made in the Labour manifestos, yet an announcement was made almost immediately, not to the House of Commons in the normal manner but by letter to the Governor.

That announcement conflicted with the Chancellor's assertion in opposition that the Bank should demonstrate a successful track record in good advice and build greater public credibility. That is what he said on 26 February this year, but, rather than wait for the Bank and its committees to establish a track record of good advice, he rushed in with this ill-considered proposal. Today the Chancellor of the Exchequer showed further contempt for the House by failing to introduce his legislation—he is not even present for the winding-up speeches. That is his attitude towards accountability to the House, and it is reflected in the Bill.

In a typically powerful speech, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) explained to the House that the achievement of low inflation does not require an independent central bank. The Conservative Government established an inflation target of 2.5 per cent. or less. We said that we would reach that target by the end of the Parliament, and we did.

One of the first things the present Chancellor did was relax that target—it is now 2.5 per cent. plus or minus 1 per cent. That sent a very dangerous message to the markets, financial commentators, economic agents and those who bargain wages and prices. That rather familiar message was that all Labour Governments are finally soft on inflation and give way on inflation. I am certain that this Labour Government, for one reason or another, will be no exception.

Ms Kelly: If the right hon. Gentleman believes that the decision to loosen the inflation target—as he put it—is so damaging to the British economy, can he explain why bond yields fell by half a point on the day that the announcement was made?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am sorry to tell the hon. Lady the bad news: inflation has increased since the Chancellor made that announcement. The Chancellor routinely, month after month, misses his inflation target. It is now above 2.5 per cent. He not only sent a signal that Labour Governments are soft on inflation, but compounded the error in the Budget by failing to deal with what he thought was incipient overheating with excessive consumer expenditure.

If that was the problem—and he certainly thought it was—why did he fail to deal with it? Instead of taxing consumer expenditure, the Chancellor taxed the corporate sector through the windfall tax and the notorious £5 billion a year raid on pension funds. He has done nothing on the fiscal side to bring down inflation since the election—in fact, he has added to it.

The strain of that anti-inflation strategy has been borne by the Bank of England. That is why we have seen five interest rate increases since the election. Who can tell whether the great men on the Monetary Policy Committee are right? We do not know, and we will not know for 18 months. That brings us back to the Chancellor's comment that he would have to wait some time until he could assess whether the Bank had built up the correct track record, before he handed it the powers. As I said, however, the Chancellor overrode that, and, in a great and unnecessary rush, he has given the Bank the authority to change interest rates.

The detail of the Bill weaves an uncertain path between making the Bank independent and keeping it as an appendage of Government. That muddle has been spotted not only by hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, but by outside commentators. Professor Gowland has

been quoted. He knows a great deal about financial regulation and banking, and he has pointed out that the new arrangement, which is in fact a contract between the Treasury and the Bank,

"will reduce the Bank's discretion."

The Bank's task is to deliver a narrowly defined inflation target. It is required to take into account the Government's more general economic objectives, such as growth and employment, but those are explicitly to be subject—and therefore secondary—to the aim of price stability. That is to be written into statute law in clause 11.

If we in this country were to experience an economic shock, perhaps a mild one—cost pressures of one sort or another—the Bank is forbidden by statute to give a higher priority to the maintenance of output and employment than to its overriding objective, which is to maintain price stability. Before the end of this Parliament, we shall see what strains and stresses that can create.

In other words, the Bill combines minimal discretion with the maximum potential for damage. The reason is that the Government want to keep the Bank on a very short lead, while at the same time being able to blame the Bank for the unpopular decisions that may be required.

The Treasury Select Committee concerned itself with the appointment of the great men on the committee and the directors. The Select Committee spotted the fact that the Monetary Policy Committee will, in part, report to the Bank's court of directors. All the members of that court are to be appointed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but the terms of appointment of the court are to be reduced from four to three years—less than a normal Parliament.

Will the Economic Secretary accept the recommendations of the all-party Select Committee that the terms of appointment of members of the Monetary Policy Committee and the court should be made longer than is proposed in the Bill?

Will the hon. Lady comment on another issue—who should be appointed to those important independent committees? We saw last week the rather regrettable spectacle of powerful outside lobbies getting at a Labour Government. We saw the motor racing industry successfully buying favours from a Labour Government. That was regrettable. It is now certain that the Labour party has broken an election pledge, under pressure from a powerful industrial lobby which happens to have given a lot of money to the Labour party.

Understandably, the House and the Select Committee, which may have anticipated that, want to be certain that the appointees to the proposed bodies are above suspicion and beyond reproach. That is the least that the House can expect from the Government. I ask the Minister to state in her reply that the appointments to the Monetary Policy Committee should be confirmed by the Treasury Select Committee, if necessary after hearings.

Another point that I would like the Minister to answer—it was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight)—relates to the transfer of banking supervision from the Bank of England to the Financial Services Authority. A joint committee might be proposed to try to keep the Treasury, the Bank and the FSA in touch with one another, but at present it is the Bank that has the expertise and the knowledge to judge systemic risk in the banking system. We believe that it is most unwise to transfer these responsibilities now to a new and untried organisation that is struggling still to set itself up and to take on the other tasks that it has to undertake.

The Bill formalises an interest-rate-setting mechanism that we believe is not necessary to control inflation, and could in practice lead to a dangerous deflationary bias. That has been asserted by Labour Members as well. We believe also that the Bill risks a wider split between fiscal policy, which remains with the Treasury, and monetary policy, which is going to the Bank. For those and other reasons advanced by my right hon. and hon. Friends, we shall be urging the House to vote against Second Reading.

9.35 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Mrs. Helen Liddell): We have just heard a speech encapsulating the difficulties in which the Conservative party finds itself. The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) could not even decide how long he wanted for his summing up.

We have seen mounting tonight the extent to which one side of the Tory party does not know what the other side is doing. Until tonight's experience, I was rather doubtful about the theory of Pavlov's dogs, but bearing in mind the number of times that Conservative Members have returned to the issue, I am now convinced that, even in their sleep, they talk about the single currency.

There is confusion on the Opposition Benches: on the one hand we are told that the inflation target is too tight, while on the other we hear that it is too loose. We hear that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) is the greatest thing since sliced bread—from a man who resigned from the right hon. and learned Gentleman's team in government. We have seen kissing cousins and the making of a marriage of convenience from a party that does not know whether it is coming or going.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Will the Minister give way?

Mrs. Liddell: Give me a minute, and I shall willingly give way to yet another member of the Opposition Front Bench, who perhaps will tell us whether the Conservative party is in favour of repealing the Bill.

Mr. Boswell *rose—*

Mrs. Liddell: I shall give way shortly.

When the hon. Gentleman comes to the Opposition Dispatch Box, perhaps he will tell us whether he takes the view of the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, who says that there will be no knee-jerk reaction to whether the proposed legislation will be repealed, or whether he takes the view of the right hon. Member for Wells, who says that there will be no need to repeal it.

Mr. Boswell: I take precisely the view of the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Minister seems to think that the question of European monetary union is not in any way associated with the Bill. That being so, why was it that, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer spoke only last week about

[Mr. Boswell]

the preparations for monetary integration and the Governor of the Bank of England referred to our being in a sense a "pre-in", the operation of monetary policy widened the divergence between British interest rates and those in continental Europe? Is that a triumph for the Government's policy?

Mrs. Liddell: We have just heard the alternative Opposition reply. It is yet another example of the extent to which Conservative Members find themselves isolated.

Various hon. Members repeatedly wanted to bring the issue round to a European central bank. Let me say quite clearly: the decisions on monetary policy that have been taken by the Chancellor and the Government are based on the domestic needs of our economy. That is one aspect that seems to be singularly lacking from Opposition Members. What else can we expect, when the right hon. Member for Wells writes in *The Sunday Telegraph*:

"The CBI is bad news for British industry"?

We have seen Opposition Members tonight driving yet another wedge between the Conservative party and business in this country.

Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman made it fairly clear that he has not followed the details of the Bill. He referred to price stability, and to whether action could be taken in the event of any external shocks to the economy. I draw his attention to part II of the Bill, clause 11, which specifically points out that, in relation to monetary policy, the objectives of the Bank of England shall be

"to maintain price stability and, subject to that, to support the . . . economic policy"

of Her Majesty's Government,

"including its objectives for growth and employment."

Indeed, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe pointed out quite clearly the mix of elements that make up macro-economic policy. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will now tell us which side he is on. Is it to be repealed? Or is it not?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I refer the hon. Lady to her own legislation, which says quite clearly, on page 5, clause 11, that the maintenance of price stability— *[Interruption.]* If she has it in front of her, perhaps she will read it to the House. It says that the objective of the legislation is to maintain price stability, and that the other objectives of economic policy are to be subject to that.

The Chief Secretary got it all the wrong way round when he introduced the Bill. Perhaps the Economic Secretary will now do us the courtesy of getting it the right way around, and conceding that the other objectives of Government policy, such as growth and unemployment, are only subject to the maintenance of price stability, so that, when there is a dilemma, such as in a shock, price stability will be the overriding statutory requirement of the actions of the Monetary Policy Committee. Will she confirm that that is in her own legislation?

Mrs. Liddell: I think that the right hon. Gentleman is having a second wind in the wind-up. There must be an echo in here, because I have just read out the relevant clause, and he has read it out again and got it the wrong way around, as he has done repeatedly throughout the evening. Indeed—to take up another point that he made about financial stability and the role of the Bank of England, the Treasury and the Financial Services Authority—he plainly has not even bothered to consult the memorandum of understanding agreed between those organisations.

That is another example of the confusion that has marked the debate from the very beginning. Whenever the shadow Chancellor got up, he would not say yes, he would not say no. He ended up impaled on the fence of his party's divisions and indecision. He claims on the one hand that the Chancellor is giving up one of the most important tools of economic policy, yet he will not tell us whether any incoming Conservative Government—should the country be so unfortunate as to get one—would repeal this legislation.

However, the same shadow Cabinet, under the leadership of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) is prepared to commit this country, for the next 10 years, to not contemplating a single currency in Europe. He says one thing, but then says another.

Presumably the single currency is of a much lower order than independence from the Bank of England. On the one hand the right hon. Gentleman says that giving the Bank of England operational independence is wrong; then he says that we are not giving it enough independence, because the Monetary Policy Committee could be influenced by the Chancellor. I hope that, by the time the Bill is considered in Standing Committee, Opposition Members will have made up their minds whether they are coming or going.

I shall take up some of the specific points that the shadow Chancellor made. He was effusive in his compliments to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, yet he stood against him in the leadership contest.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to issues of debt management, something that was raised a number of times during the debate. One reason why the clauses relating to debt management put distance between the Bank and the debt management agency is specifically to ensure that there is greater transparency and increased credibility, so that there is no chance of Bank actions being misinterpreted in any way as monetary policy actions. Nor can there be any charge of insider trading. Cash management operations will be set up to avoid conflict with banking operations.

The right hon. Gentleman also questioned whether there would be a deflationary bias. During the debate, we have heard that the proposals for the central bank will, on the one hand, be inflationary, while on the other they will be deflationary. Let us take the right hon. Gentleman's view, that there will be a deflationary bias. It is up to the Government and the Chancellor to set the targets for inflation. Indeed, the Government will regard undershooting as seriously as overshooting.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe referred to discussions in which he had been involved—the famous Ken and Eddie show, where on every occasion Ken was right and Eddie wrong. That is a classic example of why we need operational independence in the setting of interest rates. Indeed, the hon. Member for Louth and

Horncastle (Sir P. Tapsell) said that he had exerted political pressure on the former Chancellor in regard to his inflation performance.

Sir Peter Tapsell: I said nothing of the sort. I said that, in the Division Lobby, I had congratulated my right hon. and learned Friend on his decision to resist pressure from the Bank of England unnecessarily to raise interest rates.

Mrs. Liddell: In relation to the overall impact on the setting of interest rates in this country, is it not reassuring that, outside the closed atmosphere of the Lobbies of the House of Commons, there will be rational debate about the correct level for interest rates to meet the inflation target?

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said that, for certain elements of the proceedings, the minutes of the Monetary Policy Committee do not specifically refer to the names of members. However, the voting performance of members is revealed. What a difference from the Ken and Eddie show, when there was one vote plus a casting vote, and Ken held both votes. That is not the right or modern way to set interest rates.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), the Chairman of the Treasury Select Committee, made a number of telling points. A number of hon. Members have referred to the Committee's recommendations. I reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said about having an open mind on the recommendations, while taking up the points about three-year appointments.

There is a good precedent for appointments based on three years. The Hempel report suggests that, for corporate governance, there is logic in company directors being appointed for three years, because that increases accountability. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) makes a sedentary intervention. Just because an appointment is for three years does not mean that it cannot be renewed. It could be three years, six years or nine years. If the Monetary Policy Committee were ever to become static, longer appointment periods would not help the analysis of monetary policy.

A number of hon. Members referred to confirmation hearings. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said when he appeared before the Treasury Select Committee, the Government remain open-minded on that issue, but there are precedents relating to other activities of the House, which might be more widely discussed in other forums.

I greatly regretted the comments of the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle on the role of Bank of England staff after banking supervision is transferred to the Financial Services Authority. The clear implication of his comments is that, once banking supervision is removed from the Bank of England, those who work in the Bank will be second rate. As one who works closely with Bank of England staff, I think that that was a regrettable point. However, I was much reminded of the quality of the Bank's staff when I heard the very impressive speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly).

I pay due tribute to the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Mr. Wood), who made a most telling contribution to the debate. He brought us back to first principles in many instances, telling us of the history of the community that he represents and the issues that impact on it. It was an impressive and most gracious speech, in which he paid due tribute to his predecessor. He mentioned the Batley Bulldogs rugby team. Another Batley bulldog has joined the House for our deliberations in this Parliament, and I pay tribute to him.

I shall take together the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) and my hon. Friends the Members for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell).

We heard well-rehearsed arguments that, in June 1997, were part of an Adjournment debate. It is always very enjoyable to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington make her case. She has a clear case, although I do not agree with it. I remind her that allowing inflation to get out of control impacts most perniciously on lower-paid and poorer people. Losing control of inflation affects the poor more than it affects anyone else, and establishing more effective means of controlling inflation in our economy is extremely important.

From many of today's speeches by Opposition Members, one would have had the clear impression that Government economic policy begins and ends with inflation. As the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said, however, other instruments of economic policy are important.

Nevertheless, we must realise that inflation is a cornerstone of much else in economic policy. The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned growth trend rates. They are not altered in a six-month period, because experience and performance must build up within the economy. He may mock the Monetary Policy Committee's decisions on interest rates. Nevertheless, he himself will have to take responsibility for the fact that he should have been acting before the general election, but failed to do so. That point was made most eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton, West.

We have heard some thoughtful and wide-ranging speeches. We heard an impressive speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), who has taken a considerable interest in the Bank of Commerce and Credit International. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will realise the extent to which he has vigorously pursued that issue. He asked me a very specific question on the Bingham report. As the question goes wider than the subject of today's debate, for now I will say only that I have heard what he said, and that I will get back to him on the matter.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) raised some other issues. He asked, as he always does, some specific and very interesting questions. A particularly interesting one related to the possible criteria for market intervention. The Government expect that interventions beyond normal ones in money market operations will be extremely rare, and practised only if there were to be a serious systemic threat.

The memorandum of understanding—which I mentioned earlier—between the Bank and the Financial Services Authority emphasises the need for co-operation and an exchange of information in assessing the need for intervention, and the form that that intervention should take. Ultimately, it will be up to the Chancellor to approve

[Mrs. Liddell]

an intervention, and he will have to have justification for putting public money at risk. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will recognise the reasons for that.

Several points were made about financial regulation, which is a vital element of the way in which the Government are taking forward our responsibilities for the development of the financial services sector. The Bill is but the first stage in a wider reform of financial services.

The hon. Member for Twickenham asked specifically about the cost of regulation. The explanatory memorandum estimates the cost of banking supervision to be £50 million, including overheads. The basis for the Coopers and Lybrand figure of £250 million to which the hon. Gentleman referred is unknown to us. We think that it might relate to the costs of supervision in general, but we are not clear about the genesis of the Coopers and Lybrand conclusions.

We believe that bringing under a single regulator nine different structures and nine different operating forums, thus avoiding all the duplication that has caused such chaos in the financial community, will provide the opportunity for more effective regulation at lower cost. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary referred to cash ratio deposits and how they will be put on a statutory basis.

We will consult on that, to make sure that we have a proper assessment of the right level of cash ratio deposits. The Government have made it clear that our aim is that the aggregate burden on the financial institutions should be no higher, and preferably lower, than it is at present.

The hon. Member for Twickenham also asked about the role of the International Organisation of Securities Commissions. One reason we sought to reform financial regulation is that we are determined to see our financial regulation as a world beater—and as a source of competitive advantage to British financial institutions. Financial regulation is a critical element in making markets competitive globally. I hope that the hon. Member is reassured that we hope to build on the extensive experience of financial supervision available in Britain, and to play our part internationally.

The shadow Chancellor referred to the possibility of conflict between the various regulators. There is already substantial potential for conflict, some arising out of the complexity of individual firms. Firms in the financial services sector have changed dramatically since the 1980s; banks have greatly extended their activities; and the building societies that have converted to banks have a mixed bag of financial products available and have a mixed bag of regulators. The Bill will ease the burden of regulation, and make regulation more transparent.

The shadow Chancellor also referred to the cost of regulation. It is a specific commitment of the Financial Services Authority to make sure that the cost of regulation is proportionate to the benefits of regulation.

Several hon. Members mentioned British independence for the central bank, and the EMU-compatible bank. As I said, it is interesting to see how hon. Members have returned to this issue. The preparations for EMU and the debate that must take place in this country are completely different from the issues covered by the Bill. The Bill is about providing the basis for stability in our economy. Over the past 18 years, we have seen the impact of boom and bust on our economy, and the hardship caused for ordinary people. If our economy is to grow convincingly, it is essential that our decision making should be put on a sound basis that leads to coherent and stable financial policy.

At the end of the debate, the view of the Conservatives remains unclear. They have dodged the question whether they would repeal the legislation. I shall be interested to discover the line that they take in Committee.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 364, Noes 139.

Division No. 86] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul

Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Grant, Bernie
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jennifer *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livsey, Richard
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Peter
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Clive Betts and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan

Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Oliver Heald and
Mr. John Whittingdale.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, Consideration of Lords Amendments to the Local Government (Contracts) Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Question agreed to.

Local Government (Contracts) Bill

Lords amendments considered.

Clause 1

FUNCTIONS TO INCLUDE POWER TO ENTER INTO CONTRACT.

Lords amendment: No. 1, in page 1, line 19, after ("financier") insert

(", or any insurer of or trustee for the financier,")

10.14 pm

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Ms Hilary Armstrong): I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): With this, it will be convenient to discuss also Lords amendment No. 9.

Ms Armstrong: Clause 1(2) provides that a local authority may make arrangements with financiers for step-in rights; that is, rights to intervene where the contractor is unable to meet his obligations to the authority or to the financier. The amendment provides that these arrangements can also involve—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask hon. Members to leave the House quickly and quietly if they are not taking part in the debate.

Ms Armstrong: The amendment provides that these arrangements can also involve financiers' insurers or trustees. Amendment No. 9 amends clause 4 of the Bill to provide that a contract between a local authority and a financier's insurer or trustee may be a certified contract and thus may have the protection of clause 2 (1) of the Bill. That is the "safe harbour" provision.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 2

CERTIFIED CONTRACTS ASSUMED TO BE INTRA VIRES.

Lords amendment: No. 2, in page 2, line 22, leave out from first ("a") to end of line 27 and insert ("local authority has entered into a contract which is a certified contract

("the existing contract") and the existing contract is replaced by a contract entered into by it with a person or persons not identical with the person or persons with whom it entered into the existing contract, the replacement contract is also a certified contract if—")

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Clause 2 (4) provides that, where a certified contract is novated—that is, replaced by another identical contract because a new contractor or financier is substituted for the original one—the new contract shall also be a certified contract. The amendment makes it absolutely clear that, for these purposes, a contract is replaced only if the parties to the contract are different.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment: No. 3, in page 2, line 37, at end insert—

("( ) The application of subsection (1) in relation to a contract entered into by a local authority does not affect any claim for damages made by a person who is not (and has never been) a party to the contract in respect of a breach by the local authority of any duty to do, or not to do, something before entering into the contract (including, in particular, any such duty imposed by a statutory provision for giving effect to any Community obligation relating to public procurement or by section 17(1) of the Local Government Act 1988).")

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

The amendment reflects concerns raised by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) in Committee, as well as points made during the outside consultation. The amendment makes it clear that clause 2(1) does not prevent a person other than the contractor from bringing an action against the authority seeking damages because procurement procedures had been disregarded. In particular, we have in mind a claim by an unsuccessful bidder for the contract who feels that proper procurement procedures have not been complied with. Such legal action could result only in the payment of damages by the authority and not in the setting aside of the contract. It would not, therefore, affect the position of the appointed contractor or his financiers.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): We are grateful for the Government's response to the concerns expressed on the issue.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 3

THE CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Lords amendment: No. 4, in page 2, line 41, at beginning insert

("The requirement specified in this subsection is that")

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 5 to 7.

Ms Armstrong: The amendments clarify a point about the certification requirements referred to in clause 3, and ensure that the requirements for certifying contracts will operate as intended. As long as a certificate states that it has been copied to any persons prescribed in regulations, and confirms that requirements imposed by regulations concerning the issue of the certificate have been complied with, the contractor can be satisfied that the certificate will not be invalidated if it becomes evident that the authority has not in fact done those things.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 5 to 7 agreed to.

Clause 4

CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS: SUPPLEMENTARY

Lords amendment: No. 8, in page 3, line 25, at end insert—

("( ) Where the certification requirements have been satisfied in relation to a contract by a local authority within section 1(3)(a) or (d), the local authority shall secure that throughout the period for which the contract operates—

(a) a copy of the certificate which has been issued is open to inspection by members of the public at all reasonable times without payment, and

(b) members of the public are afforded facilities for obtaining copies of that certificate on payment of a reasonable fee.")

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

The amendment was drafted in response to an undertaking that I gave to the hon. Member for Christchurch in Committee. It requires a local authority that has issued a certificate, other than the receiver of the Metropolitan police district or a probation committee, to secure that a copy of the certificate should be freely available for inspection by members of the public at all reasonable times, and to provide facilities to allow copies to be obtained for a reasonable fee. The authority remains under that duty for as long as a certified contract operates.

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to the Minister for his positive response on this open government amendment, which originated with the Opposition. Perhaps he could explain, however, why it does not extend to the receiver for the Metropolitan police district or to a probation committee.

Mr. Raynsford: I feared that the hon. Gentleman would pursue that point: it is a complicated one, and I ask him to bear with me while I explain the circumstances.

Unlike other local authorities, probation committees are accountable to the Home Secretary and not to the local taxpayer. They are under a statutory duty under section 4 of the Probation Service Act 1993 to ensure that probation services are provided efficiently, and the Home Secretary has statutory powers to intervene when a probation committee fails to discharge its duties responsibly.

The expenditure of probation committees is 80 per cent. funded by the Home Office. Only about 20 per cent. is funded by local authorities, and much of that is supported by revenue support grant from my Department. Only a small proportion is raised by local taxation and, accordingly, probation committees are primarily accountable to central Government.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): It occurs to me that that is just about the ratio of funding for local government at the moment: 80 per cent. from central Government, and 20 per cent. raised locally.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman is talking about something that is not relevant to the specific Lords amendment. If he consults the procedures of the House, he will realise that he is speaking wide of the mark.

[Mr. Raynsford]

Probation committees are not subject to the disclosure requirements of the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985. The accountability of probation committees to the Home Secretary for the effectiveness and efficiency of the services they provide covers the lawfulness of the contracts that they enter into, and, through the Home Secretary, they are accountable to Parliament. The Home Secretary monitors the provision of probation services through Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation and the Audit Commission.

In view of those existing arrangements, it is not necessary to require probation committees, for reasons of public accountability, to allow inspection of certificates by members of the public.

On 16 July, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the prisons/probation review, which, after public consultation, may have a major impact on the structure and organisation of the probation services and the legislation covering their functions. Similar arrangements apply to the inner London probation service, where the receiver for the Metropolitan police district acts for statutory purposes in place of the responsible authority—that is, one or more local authorities. The probation committee for the inner London probation service is also accountable to the Home Secretary.

The receiver for the Metropolitan police district is not subject to local government disclosure requirements. The receiver is for most purposes not a local authority. Through the Home Secretary, as police authority, he is accountable to Parliament. His general liability to account and be answerable with the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis is contained in the Metropolitan Police Act 1829 and the subsequent 1851 Act.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendment No. 9 agreed to.

Clause 5

SPECIAL PROVISION FOR JUDICIAL REVIEWS AND AUDIT REVIEWS

Lords amendment: No. 10, in page 4, line 5, after ("on") insert

("an application for judicial review or")

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments Nos. 11 and 12.

Ms Armstrong: The amendments reflect concerns raised by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) in Committee, as well as in outside consultation. They have two effects. They expressly give a court a discretion in judicial review, as well as in audit review, to determine that a certified contract shall have effect as if the local authority had had power to enter into it and had exercised that power properly. They also require the court, in considering how to exercise that discretion, to have regard to two matters. The court would have to consider the likely consequences of a decision to set the contract aside, first, for the authority's financial position and, secondly, for the provision of services to the public.

It is important that where a certified contract is challenged in judicial review or by the auditor, the court shall have a clear discretion to allow the contract to continue if, after weighing up all conflicting interests and taking account of all relevant circumstances, it feels that, on balance, that would be in the wider interests, financial and otherwise, of the local community.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I thank the Minister for considering the discussions in Committee and on Report in which I raised the matter and which led to the amendment. It is important that the courts can have regard for the consequences for council tax payers and for the finances of the local authority, but I ask the Minister to assure the House that the Bill does not preclude the courts from considering the impact of discharge terms. Having read the debate in the other place, especially in Committee, I was struck by the remarks of the Lord Donaldson, who said:

"I just do not know whether a court could set aside discharge terms."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 October 1997; Vol. 582, c. 629.]

Can the Minister say whether the Bill would prevent a court setting aside discharge terms? That goes to the heart of the matter that I raised. It would help the House to have an assurance on that basis.

Ms Armstrong: As we are in the final stages of the Bill, I want to make sure that I get this absolutely right.

If the discharge terms are set aside, the repudiation terms apply, as set out in clause 7. In other words, if the judge is not satisfied that the discharge terms are not proper discharge terms, he can apply clause 7, the repudiation terms.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 11 and 12 agreed to.

Clause 7

ABSENCE OF RELEVANT DISCHARGE TERMS

Lords amendment: No. 13, in page 5, line 16, leave out from ("section") to ("do") in line 21 and insert

("the circumstances in which there are no relevant discharge terms having effect between the local authority and a person who is a party to the contract include (as well as circumstances in which no such terms have been agreed) circumstances in which the result of a determination or order of a court, made (despite section 6(4)) on an application for judicial review or an audit review, is that such terms")

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

The amendment was made partly in response to a point raised by Lord Bowness on Second Reading in another place about the relationship between clauses 6(4) and 7(3).

The amendment clarifies the circumstances under which there are no discharge terms having effect. Clearly, there will be no discharge terms where none have been agreed by the parties to the certified contract. It is also possible, however, that, despite clause 6(4), a court might conclude in an extreme case in public law proceedings

that terms agreed as discharge terms are not to have effect. The amendment to clause 7(3) makes it clear that that, too, would be a situation in which there were no discharge terms, so that the contractor or financier would be entitled to repudiatory damages.

Lords amendment agreed to.

New clause

Lords amendment: No. 14, after clause 8, to insert the following new clause—*Contracting out of functions in connection with certified contracts*—

"—(1) An authorisation given by virtue of an order under section 70 of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 (authorisation by local authority of exercise by another person of functions of authority for period not exceeding ten years) may specify that it is to be for a period exceeding ten years if it is given in connection with a certified contract.

(2) But an authorisation given in connection with a certified contract may not by virtue of subsection (1) specify that it is to be for a period exceeding the shorter of—

(a) the period for which the contract is to operate, and

(b) forty years.

(3) For the purposes of this section an authorisation is given in connection with a certified contract if—

(a) the authority by which it is given is a local authority for the purposes of this Act,

(b) the authority and the authorised person are parties to the contract, and

(c) the authorisation is given to enable the authorised person to perform or better perform his obligations under the contract."

10.30 pm

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this, it will be convenient to take Lords amendments Nos. 16 to 18.

Mr. Raynsford: I beg to move that this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

The effect of amendment No. 14 is that where a local authority is to enter into a certified contract, it may authorise the contractor to exercise any function that it is permitted to contract out by an order under part II of the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 for the period for which the contract is to operate, subject to a maximum of 40 years. The 1994 Act at present limits authorisations to 10 years, which would limit the scope for partnerships.

Amendments Nos. 16 and 17 are consequential. The effect is that the new clause will be treated in the same way as clauses 2 to 8. It will come into force at the same time as those clauses, on a day to be appointed by the Secretary of State, and it will apply to any contract entered into after 12 June 1997.

Amendment No. 18, which slightly modifies the title of the Bill, is required to reflect the subject matter of the new clause.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Clause 9

POWER TO TREAT EXPENDITURE AS NOT BEING CAPITAL EXPENDITURE

Lords amendment: No. 15, in page 6, line 22, leave out ("55(7)") and insert ("55(3) or (7)")

Ms Armstrong: I beg to move, That this House doth agree with the Lords in the said amendment.

The amendment refines the amendment to section 57 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997 proposed in clause 9 of the Bill, and further extends the opportunity to enter into partnership contracts. Under section 55(2) of the Act, a magistrates courts committee is able to procure any goods and services that are current expenditure items direct from suppliers, rather than through the paying authority.

Section 55(3) defines current items as items that, if they were procured by the paying authority, would not be capital expenditure. The amendment, by including section 55(3) in the regulation-making power conferred by clause 9, will enable expenditure under certain partnership contracts to be treated as "not capital" for the purpose of allowing magistrates courts committees to procure direct. That will allow the committees to enter into specified contracts direct with suppliers.

Mr. Chope: I thank the hon. Lady for the way in which she has dealt with this and the other amendments. It is significant that there is a lot more interest in the Bill at this stage, after it has been considered in the other place, than there was when it was initially considered. Perhaps that is an indication of the increasing pressure on the Government as the weeks of this Parliament go by.

Conservative Members are certainly conscious of the fact that we could have debated these issues all night. The lack of knowledge that certain Labour Members have on this subject tempted us to take them through the procedure for the whole night, but we decided on reflection that we would not do so on this occasion. Perhaps future opportunities will arise.

Lords amendment agreed to.

Lords amendments Nos. 16 to 18 agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119 (9) (European Standing Committees),

FIFTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT (RTD)

That this House takes note of European Community Documents Nos. 7310/97, on the European Fifth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, and 10385/97, on the amended proposal for the Fifth Framework Programme; and supports the Government's view that the Commission's proposals would benefit from amendment in key areas to improve focus, targeting and responsiveness to user needs.—[*Mr. Clelland.*]

Question agreed to.

Transport Links (Dover)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10.34 pm

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): I am grateful for the opportunity to make my maiden speech in this Adjournment debate on the subject of my choice—a matter essential to the past, present and future well-being of my constituency. Although more than half of my constituency can be described as rural, the majority of jobs are either related to the port or town-based, and the very existence of the port and the town relies on Dover's transport links—road and rail links to other parts of Kent and to London, the cross-channel links to France and Belgium, and deep-sea shipping links to other parts of Europe and to the worldwide shipping lanes.

Early in my Merchant Navy career, I developed the British seafarer's natural affection for the sight of the white cliffs of Dover—it was our first sniff of Europe, our first view of Britain and our first sight of home. However, over the past 18 years, living in Dover and Deal and bringing up my family in Dover, I have been able to enjoy the much wider attractions of the area. These include the greenery of the north downs which lie above the white cliffs, the splendid views from Dover castle, the enchanting seaside town of Deal and, of course, the warmth and steadfast character of the people who populate my very special and very beautiful constituency—the constituency that we like to call the white cliffs country.

Those people's jobs and their futures are closely related to the sustained success of our cross-channel ferries, our sea-cats and our hovercraft, and the continued development of the public trust port of Dover, which has served one of the busiest and most strategic sea crossings in the world for more than a century. Dover has long been privileged to act as the gateway to Europe: we are pleased to serve in that role, which provides us with direct jobs on cross-channel ferries, jobs in the port of Dover and jobs in port-related service industries. However, we are also charged with serving as gatekeepers, which brings duties and responsibilities that on occasion tax our resources, impact negatively on our communities and strain our inadequate transport links.

In the short time since the new Labour Government came to power, we have suffered the criminal activities of bootleggers, the influx of hundreds of mostly bogus asylum seekers and the crippling disruption caused by the recent French lorry drivers' dispute. For many years, we have had to witness the carriage of live animals for export: we have seen the cruelty that it inflicts, and we look forward to the day when this evil trade will cease. Just over the horizon, we are bracing ourselves for major job losses with the P and O and Stena line proposals to cut their fleet in a merged operation. We face the threat of further massive redundancies if our on-board duty-free sales are abolished.

Of course, I make no connection between the election of the new Government and Dover's difficulties—on the contrary, Ministers have listened to our concerns and, where possible, acted promptly to ease our problems. However, problems in our transport links have remained unaddressed for many years. The link that has caused most of our distress has been the fixed link—the channel tunnel—not only because it was allowed to be built without a public inquiry, but because of the uneven way in which the previous Government supported the tunnel in relation to the cross-channel fleet and the port of Dover.

Nothing highlights the uneven approach of the Conservative Government more than the comparison between the tunnel, which was provided with a four-lane motorway connection right up to the terminal entrance before the tunnel was operational, and the port, which, after 20 years of all-party campaigning, still relies on the inadequate A2 single carriageway at its eastern approach.

I acknowledge that, after the tunnel was operational, the A20 was extended into Dover, but that was one of the tunnel-related roads, to give east Kent access to the tunnel, and its configuration means that drivers travelling from London to east Kent are exposed to 70 miles of channel tunnel signage and are then invited to leave the motorway for the Eurotunnel terminal 10 miles before they reach the port of Dover.

Dualling of the last seven miles of the A2 from Lydden to Dover is well overdue. It will make an important contribution to the economic development of the area by easing traffic flows to the port and to the towns of Dover and Deal, opening up better access to the White Cliffs business park and supporting improved road links to the proposed new industrial development at the redundant Ministry of Defence site at Old Park barracks, in addition to greatly improving safety on a piece of road that has an unacceptably high accident rate.

I am aware that the project is now being considered as part of the roads review, but I urge Ministers to take account of the fact that this short stretch of inadequate road is an essential link to the port of Dover, which is diversifying and expanding to meet the challenge of the channel tunnel, and it is crucial to the successful development of our job creation projects.

At this stage, it may be appropriate to give some recognition to the efforts of my predecessor, Mr. David Shaw, the work that he put into campaigning for the dualling of the A2, and the careful attention that he gave to his constituents in casework. He took a robust and combative stance in the Chamber on many issues—as you may well remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker—but I felt that he had gone a little too far when, only four months after the general election, he returned to Dover with a camera crew and accused the new Labour Government of failing to dual the A2.

Before Mr. Shaw, there was Mr. Peter Rees, who, in the few contacts that I had with him, always acted in a gentlemanly and helpful manner; before him was the late David Ennals, who enjoyed a distinguished career in the House before being elevated to another place, where he continued to work hard promoting overseas aid and fostering international relationships.

All three of my predecessors pressed hard for better road links, but Dover also suffers from inadequate rail links. As the Government consider their existing plans to develop an integrated transport system, I am sure that Ministers will wish to take account of the need to encourage investment in the rail links to ports such as Dover, where relatively small amounts of funding can open up new modes of rail transport and enhance the potential of our train service facilities.

A truly integrated transport system will need to link road and rail networks to international shipping routes as well as the short sea routes to continental Europe. With such links in mind, it troubles me to hear that, at a time when the Government are seeking to shift freight from road to rail, Railtrack appears to be selling off its freight yards, such as Town Yard at Dover's Western Docks terminal.

Dover has survived many difficulties in the past 15 years. First, we had to put up with the disruption caused by the construction phase of the channel tunnel and its road connections. In the little village estate of Aycliffe, thousands of tonnes of countryside were gouged out behind Shakespeare cliff, and 71 homes were demolished for road building.

Secondly, in a premature response to the impact of the tunnel, P and O European Ferries forced staff cuts in 1988 which resulted in a bitter 12-month dispute and the sacking of more than 1,000 local seafarers who were fighting to maintain safe manning levels on the vessels. Many of those sacked are still unemployed, and the P and O Sacked Seafarers Committee is still campaigning for justice and compensation for those local people.

Thirdly, at Christmas 1993, as the single market came into being, we lost 600 jobs in one weekend when the roles of the freight forwarders and the frontier brokers ended. Just last month, ex-miners in the village of Aylesham gathered to mark the 10th anniversary of the closure of their pit and the complete shut-down of the east Kent coalfield. Overall, some 2,000 jobs have been squeezed out of our ferry and port-related industry in an effort to compete with the tunnel. People are rightly angry that a bankrupt channel tunnel with £8 billion of debt, which was heavily favoured by the previous Government, should be allowed to continue to steal traffic from the highly successful surface fleet, and further to threaten the jobs of local people.

Dover has suffered in the past and survived, and we are fighting back again now. In the village of Aylesham—where male unemployment reached 25 per cent.—the local people, supported by public and private partnerships, have opened a complex of workshops, training areas and community facilities to create jobs and breathe new hope into the village and the surrounding areas. The Labour district council has won single regeneration budget funding for a £17 million project to regenerate the east Kent coalfield and create more than 500 new jobs.

The barracks, vacated when the Royal Marines school of music in Deal was shut down, will hopefully soon be developed to create jobs and provide educational and community facilities. However, we shall need help from Kent county council with improving the A258 and providing better access. Similarly, the St Radigund's industrial estate will be sustained and enhanced if improved access can be provided at the notorious Coombe Valley road railway bridge.

The port of Dover is now safe from privatisation. I thank the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) for their visits to Dover and their robust support for our campaign to stop the privatisation of the port in 1996. Now that the threat has passed, the harbour board is planning an ambitious expansion of the already successful cruise terminal. I am pleased to say that it is determined to retain the train ferry services to take advantage of Labour's new transport initiatives.

Dover has other ambitious plans too numerous to cover in this short debate, but the key to them all is the provision of improved road links, the maintenance and upgrading of our existing rail links, and even-handed support for our highly successful surface fleet as it adapts to meet the changes and the challenges posed by the channel tunnel.

10.47 pm

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser) and to the Minister for allowing me to make a brief contribution to the debate.

My hon. Friend's maiden speech was excellent, and I enjoyed it very much. I wish to associate myself with all his comments, and I add an extra plea to the Minister—I do not expect her to respond to it tonight. Will the Government give sympathetic consideration to the need to improve the road that links my hon. Friend's Dover constituency with the neighbouring constituency of South Thanet?

I have referred to the A256 before in the House. The road link is crucial to the economic future of Thanet and supports the largest employer in our region, the pharmaceutical company Pfizer. The improvement of that road is absolutely vital not only to that company but to my whole constituency and to the ferry industry in Ramsgate, which is a close neighbour of Dover.

10.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser) on his maiden speech. It is regrettable that so few hon. Members were in the House to hear him give a speech that showed not only his intimate knowledge of his constituency and his constituents, but his dedication to them and their interests. He displayed his generosity by allowing my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) an intervention in his debate.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for giving us an opportunity to debate such an important topic. In 1996, the port of Dover accounted for 36 per cent. of the United Kingdom's international passenger traffic and 12 per cent. of the UK's international unitised freight.

Dover is the largest trust port in the UK in terms of turnover—£43 million in 1996, an increase of 8 per cent. on 1995. The harbour board has been investing substantial sums in the port, where there has recently been important expansion in the cruise liner business.

Clearly, Dover has a major role in the United Kingdom's links not only with continental Europe but with the rest of the world. That highlights the fact that good transport links are vital to this country's continued economic success. The best use of the existing transport infrastructure will be made to ensure that the economic importance of Dover is maintained and enhanced in a sustainable way.

I well understand my hon. Friend's desire for early decisions on the road schemes that he and my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet mentioned, particularly the dualling of the A2 from Lydden to Dover. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dover will be aware, that scheme

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

is currently being considered as part of our roads review. He will also know that the Government have embarked on a fundamental review of transport policy. Our objectives are a strong economy, a sustainable environment and an inclusive society. Transport is a vital part of all those aims.

Good communications are central to the economy and our quality of life. However, the backdrop to the fundamental review is a candid recognition that we need a shift in direction. Revised national road traffic forecasts published last month show traffic increasing by almost 40 per cent. over the next 20 years. If current policies continue, congestion will get worse, the impact on the environment will be even more severe, and those who have no access to private transport will find it even more difficult to get around.

We must develop an integrated transport system that makes the best use of the contribution that each mode can make; ensures that all options are considered on a basis that is fair and is seen to be fair; and takes into account from the outset considerations of accessibility, integration, safety, the environment and the economy. Above all, an integrated transport system must be sustainable. One of the encouraging aspects of such an ambitious task is the degree of consensus attaching to the view that we need to change.

It is a feature of the policy development work now under way that we are involving a wide range of external advice and expertise, including local authorities, businesses, trade unions, transport professionals and transport users. That is the context for the roads review examining the role that trunk roads should play in an integrated and sustainable transport policy.

Against the background of increased congestion, we have three broad options for roads: first, to make better use of existing infrastructure; secondly, to manage demand; and thirdly, to provide new infrastructure.

To make best use of existing infrastructure is the obvious first choice. It has been provided at substantial cost in financial and environmental terms, and we must make the best use of that investment. We must, however, be realistic about what the various options can deliver.

We must also seriously consider other, harder options—managing demand and providing new infrastructure. Managing demand is a vast topic. It encompasses reducing the need to travel—by land use planning, for example—an assessment of the extent to which a shift to other modes can be encouraged, and inevitably, the question of controlling demand by pricing or rationing mechanisms.

Providing new infrastructure is a very difficult option, financially and in terms of its potential impact on the environment. Our starting point is that we will not proceed with major new road construction unless we are satisfied that there is no better alternative. Even then, there will be difficult choices to be made within the limited resources available.

There is no substitute for rigorous case-by-case examination of the options. Volume 2 of our roads review consultation document entitled "What role for trunk roads?" sets out, region by region, the perceived traffic problems and the roads programme inherited from our predecessors.

We are seeking from those regional consultations a view on whether those are the most important problems, or whether other problems deserve greater priority. We envisage two outputs from this part of the review: a firm, short-term investment programme, and a programme of studies to examine the remaining problems, out of which the medium and long-term investment programme will emerge.

The Government office for the south-east has held three day-long seminars over the autumn as part of our consultation process on integrated transport. A seminar in Ashford on 14 October examined transport corridors in the east of the region, including the Kent transport corridor between the M25 and the channel ports. Points made by my hon. Friend about the importance of the A2 Lydden-Dover improvement, in terms of safety, regeneration and support of the local economy were also made at the seminar. There was a clear consensus on the importance, regionally and nationally, of high-quality reliable routes, both road and rail, to the south-east ports. Some problems were highlighted as requiring particularly urgent solutions. We shall be taking all these views into account, along with the written and other representations that we have had.

Developing a forward-looking integrated transport policy that supports a strong economy, contributes to a sustainable environment and helps to create a just and inclusive society, is a huge challenge. The road network is, of course, only one piece of the transport jigsaw. My hon. Friend has spoken of the way in which the port of Dover is responding to the challenge of the channel tunnel. The tunnel has added to the importance of south-east Kent as a transport hub, and the building of the channel tunnel rail link will increase this still further. As well as allowing a doubling of the number of trains between London, Paris and Brussels at peak times, development of the channel tunnel rail link, which the Government are keen to see delivered as quickly as possible, will provide additional capacity for new and much faster commuter trains between Kent and London.

The Government are determined to encourage greater use of the railways for passengers and freight. We wish to see improvements in existing rail services. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport recently gave the franchising director new objectives, setting out the development of the passenger rail network of the future and mapping out the key role that we envisage for railways in our integrated transport policy. Connex South Eastern, which operates rail services to Dover, is required by its franchise agreement to replace all its existing mark 1 slam-door rolling stock.

I understand that it is its intention that the brand new 375 class rolling stock will be deployed on the route to Dover via Sevenoaks-Ashford by the end of 1999. Railtrack, in partnership with Connex South Eastern, is also in the process of carrying out major improvements to Dover Priory station to enhance the service that is provided to passengers. I shall write to my hon. Friend about the proposed sale of rail lands.

The Government are keen to encourage an increase in the use of rail freight, thus delivering important environmental benefits by taking lorries off our roads. Rail freight grants are available to help meet the extra costs generally associated with moving freight by rail.

My hon. Friend raised the question of the recent French lorry drivers' dispute. The Government deeply regretted the disruption caused by the blockade in France. We are pleased that the dispute has now been settled and that our hauliers are again able to go about their legitimate business.

We acknowledge that the ferries had the option of sailing to alternative ports in Belgium, whereas the channel tunnel is a fixed link, but we made it clear that we sought unrestricted access through this principal entry point to mainland Europe.

My hon. Friend raised a number of issues that are of particular concern to Dover and to his constituents, though not all are within my direct responsibility. The proposed merger between P and O and Stena Line is a matter, as I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, for my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade.

My hon. Friend mentioned also a topic that is of concern in Dover and, I would say, throughout the country—the export of live animals. I understand that it would not be possible for the Government to take unilateral action to ban live exports but we await with great interest the outcome of the Compassion in World Farming case. The Government have already taken significant steps to improve the welfare of animals during transport, and we are committed to making further progress.

The abolition of duty free sales for intra-EU journeys is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I regret that my hon. Friend has heard me reiterate a point that I made to him when he came to see me with a deputation of other colleagues who are also concerned about the issue.

My hon. Friend also touched on the recent influx of asylum seekers arriving at Dover, which now appears to have abated owing to the measures that the Government have taken—including television broadcasts in the Czech Republic—to correct misleading impressions about our immigration procedures. However, we continue to monitor the situation carefully.

Again, I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing Dover's transport links to the attention of the House. I am sure that he will appreciate that, until we have completed our fundamental review of transport policy and the role of trunk roads within that policy, I cannot tell him what priority the schemes he advocates can expect to be given, but I can assure him that the Government are fully aware of the important—indeed, unique—role that Dover plays in Britain's transport network.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 12 November 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Germ Warfare Tests (West Country)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Graham Allen.]*

9.34 am

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): During the 1960s and 1970s, germ warfare tests were carried out off the west country coast by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. During that period, and indeed as late as 1977, testing took place from Lyme bay to Devonport, involving a cocktail of bacteria, including E. coli 162, B. globigii and serratia marcescens, being pumped into the atmosphere. Those germs were apparently used for their usefulness in simulating a biological attack. The issue has recently come to light because of the release of previously classified documents.

The Western Morning News, and especially its journalist, Mark Townsend, deserve high praise for their pioneering work in bringing the facts to the public's attention and the responsible way in which they have raised the inevitable question of what lasting effects the experiments may have had. Even today, the many people living in the coastline areas where the experiments took place continue to suffer a growing number of unexplained illnesses and medical conditions.

The issue is not party political. My purpose in bringing it before the House is simply to find out exactly what happened, and especially which bacteria were used. I wish to find out why the experiments were conducted in the first place; what safeguards were devised at the time, if any; and what assessments successive Governments have made of the lasting dangers. I believe that those living in the coastline areas deserve specific answers and nothing else will suffice.

Many documents, especially those relating to later incidents of testing in Portland and Devonport, have still not been released. Obviously, we do not know how many documents exist, but the fact that full disclosure has still not taken place must inevitably raise fears and suspicions. At least in Portland and Devonport we have an explanation of sorts of why the experiments took place.

Last year, the former Secretary of State for Defence, Michael Portillo, in a letter to the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) said that the experiments were

"to assess the vulnerability of naval vessels, to determine the hazard arising from a biological attack and to evaluate rapid detection concepts."

The purpose of the earlier Lyme bay experiments is, however, far from clear. In those earlier experiments, it seems that a bacterial brew was pumped into the atmosphere and deliberately aimed inland towards the coast of west Dorset and east Devon. The extent of spread and penetration was supposedly monitored for up to 10 miles inshore. I had better lay my cards on the table, and concede that a physics with chemistry O-level from 1965 does not equip me to come to a final conclusion, but I wonder how a floating cloud of bacteria could be monitored in that way. Why 10 miles? Why not nine miles or 11 miles? One has only to ask those and similar questions to wonder at what was done.

The possible lasting effects of those actions has not been properly explained. The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency continues to reiterate the theory that the bacteria used will have had no harmful effects, but what is the evidence for that proposition? It is not the agreed position of several of the country's leading independent microbiologists. Professor Richard Lacey of Leeds university, writing on the army's germ warfare simulants, maintains that much evidence points to the conclusion that the type of germs used cannot be labelled harmless.

I do not wish to detain the House at length by going through all the examples that could be cited, but I want to give just one example from Professor Lacey's book. George H. Connell, the assistant to the director of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in America, addressing the United States Senate hearings on biological warfare testing, said in 1977:

"There is no such thing as a microorganism that cannot cause trouble."

He continued:

"If you get the right concentration at the right place. at the right time, and in the right person, something is going to happen."

Professor Lacey concludes:

"none of the four agents that the army admits using over populated areas in simulated biological warfare attacks is harmless."

Indeed, many families who have lived in the area since the experiments took place feel a growing concern that there may be a link between the experiments and their high proportion of health problems. Of the 22 families who grew up in one village—East Lulworth, on the coast of Lyme bay—all the girls have had miscarriages or given birth to children with defects.

One family in particular, that of Noreen and Sidney Hall, has seen an unprecedented number of unexplained illnesses over the past 14 years. Each of the four daughters has had a miscarriage or given birth to a disabled child. Babies have been born with missing limbs, been afflicted with severe learning difficulties, or started life with shrunken brains caused by unexplained illnesses.

Those who served in the ship that was used in the experiments, the Icewhale, also believe that there is a link between the experiments and various mysterious illnesses. Fishermen caught in the cloud of bacteria have complained of the effects of a "tear-gas-like" cloud emitted at the time.

The apparent failure to explain in detail what was done, and the lack of any detail concerning the possible lasting consequences of the experiments, led many people to say that the tests are responsible for a number of debilitating illnesses and birth defects. Whatever the reasons for the tests at the time, I can safely say that it is inconceivable that such experiments would be carried out in such a random way today. People on the south coast were used as human guinea pigs.

If people are to know the possible effects of what they were subjected to, and when and over what period they were subjected to it, the only reasonable course of action

[Mr. Patrick Nicholls]

is for the Ministry of Defence to release all the paperwork relating to the incidents. The Government must also carry out a full and public examination to establish once and for all whether there is a causal link between the experiments conducted and the personal medical tragedies that I have mentioned.

Obviously, the present Government are not responsible for the experiments. None the less, it is their responsibility to carry out the fullest investigation into the experiments, so as finally to determine exactly what went on, and what the possible consequences are. If a link is established between the experiments and the unexplained illnesses, the question of compensation will have to be faced.

It will not be sufficient to say that there is no evidence that people have been harmed, simply because at the time it may have been assumed that the whole process was safe. What people need to know is not the assumptions that may have been made 25 and more years ago, but what, in the light of today's knowledge, they may have suffered.

I have deliberately spoken briefly, so as to give other hon. Members the chance to take part. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Hams, in particular—

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): Totnes.

Mr. Nicholls: Times change.

I know that my hon. Friend, in particular, has been concerned about the matter, and that he needs to attend a Committee in a few moments. I also want to allow the Minister the necessary time to respond. I am pleased to see that the Minister of State himself has come here to reply to the debate. I hope that he will have been helped by the fact that I provided him with a copy of my speech in advance.

I have not sought to apportion blame. I have set out such facts as are available as briefly and dispassionately as I can. I pass no judgment on the scientific aspects of the matter; indeed, I am not qualified to do so. What I can say is that, finally, once and for all, answers are needed. I should like to think that, when the Minister has responded to the debate, the process of answering the questions that people want answered will be seen to have started today.

9.44 am

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I have only a few words to say, chiefly to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) for bringing the matter to the notice of the House. Clearly it concerns us all in the west country. My hon. Friend does a great service to his constituency and to the rest of Devon by raising the matter.

I am glad to say that I cannot endorse some of the cases that my hon. Friend has raised, simply because, fortunately, my experiences have not been the same as his. I have not been advised of any problems in the former South Hams constituency, which is now known as Totnes. All I can say is that the matter will cause the House some concern, and that I feel sure that the Government will investigate it as they should.

9.45 am

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on bringing the debate to the House. As a Member who has been actively involved with the problem for more than a year, perhaps I can throw more light on what has happened already, and what we are trying to do about it.

It is important that we give serious consideration to the concerns of our constituents, but also that we do not leave them in an alarmed state, in which all the health problems of the past 30 years will be blamed on the experiments.

I certainly follow my hon. Friend in asking for the release of any information that is still to be released under the 30-year rule—in some cases, the 30 years may not yet be up.

When the matter first became public knowledge, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) tabled a series of questions bringing to the attention of the House the fact that the experiments had taken place. We were told that bacteria that would be totally harmless had been released, to check how bacteria of that nature dispersed around the coastline, and how they might or might not penetrate the defences of Her Majesty's warships.

The immediate reaction in my constituency was dramatic. One of my local papers, the *Dorset Evening Echo*, to which I pay tribute, sent someone to the Public Records Office to find out as much information as possible. In a series of articles, the paper explained what had been going on. That was the most important development in terms of getting information out to the public.

The local authorities and I approached the then Government and said, "Look, this is an extremely important issue. What are you going to do about explaining to the public what has happened?" With representatives from the county council, from West Dorset district council and from Weymouth and Portland district council, I had an interesting and detailed meeting with the then Minister of State for Defence Procurement, who explained that the Ministry had examined all the files and was satisfied that no harm had been done to anybody. However, it was strange that such a harmless experiment had been kept so secret.

One interesting development had taken place under a previous Labour Administration. Like other Ministers of the time, Lord Healey said that he knew nothing about the experiments, and that the scientists had never told him what was happening. There is some dispute about that, because there are records within the Ministry of Defence showing that he was being briefed at Porton Down while the experiments were being designed—but there is no record of whether he was briefed on those specific issues.

We are also told that, at the time, an independent committee approved all such experiments, and that those independent scientists said that what was being done was perfectly safe. None the less, in today's climate it would not be possible to do the experiments without telling the public. They concerned not secret materials but the dispersal of bacteria. Not telling people that they were being carried out was reprehensible.

If the public and the health authorities had known what was happening at the time, they could have checked the population to monitor the effects. We understand that no such checks were made, and there is no record of anything

untoward happening at the time. Had checks been made, we could have ensured that not only the Ministry of Defence but the health authorities thought that the experiments were safe.

The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, which is now responsible for Porton Down, agreed that, rather than holding a public inquiry—an expensive way of going round in circles—it would mount a detailed exhibition. That was shown in three places in Dorset, to allow the public to examine all the available information and to decide whether they could have been affected. DERA is adamant that it has done nothing that could have given rise to problems.

The exhibition was shown during the summer recess, and various people said that they had a medical condition, that their cattle had died because of E. coli, or that they had all sorts of other problems, but it is difficult to link any such incidents directly to the tests. Nobody is suggesting that, on the morning of a test, or five days afterwards, something suddenly happened. People who have experienced a cluster of problems wonder whether the tests are responsible.

We invited the Dorset health authority to be represented at the exhibition, to reassure the public. Wisely, the authority decided not to do so, because it believes that it should be seen as the guardian of the public interest, and it wants to investigate independently what is going on without being seen as part and parcel of the Government or Ministry of Defence machine.

The most serious allegation is that East Lulworth has had many more birth defects and miscarriages than would normally be expected. I wrote to the Dorset health authority about that; its immediate reaction was to say that it had no record whatever of undue problems in East Lulworth. The family who had experienced particular difficulties decided to conduct a survey. They found that many girls who had been brought up in East Lulworth had married and moved away, spreading the cluster of miscarriages and birth defects further afield, so the health records did not show that East Lulworth had an especial problem.

The health authority assures me that it is using that information and conducting an epidemiological study. That route is much more positive than simply asking the MOD why the people are having problems. East Lulworth is close to a nuclear facility, and even closer to a tank range. I certainly hope that the Minister will assist the health authority to find out whether any substances are emanating from the tank range; after all, we use a lot of nasty materials to fire tank rounds, and within the rounds themselves. Let us ensure that we concentrate on establishing whether there is a link between the tests and the problems.

I have received a helpful letter from Dorset health authority about some letters that I sent on from people with concerns. It says:

"I have passed on these letters to the Consultant in Public Health who is investigating the concerns . . . The health authority became aware of the germ warfare experiments at the same time as the general public and has liaised closely with relevant local authorities as well as with members of the general public who have written in or telephoned the Department of Public Health about specific issues. Mr. Peter Harvey, the Chief Executive of Dorset County Council, has made a file available to the Public Health Department which includes all correspondence received by his Department from the general public detailing their concerns of possible health problems associated with the germ warfare experiments. The letters cover a very wide range of medical problems and give no indication that there has been any clustering of any particular problem in any given locality within Dorset. The Authority is currently only aware of one cluster of childhood illness in Dorset, and that is the neuroblastoma cluster in the Littlemoor area of Weymouth which is being investigated as part of a national epidemiological study.

During July 1997 a Consultant in Public Health from the Dorset Health Authority, together with a Community Infection Control Nurse, made a visit to DERA and were given a presentation detailing the nature of the germ warfare experiments. This confirmed that the bacteria released over Dorset as part of the experiments were not known to cause illness in man at the time the experiments were conducted. However, one of the bacteria, Serratia marcescens, has been subsequently demonstrated to cause acute illness in people with weak immune systems especially in Intensive Care Unit settings. There is currently no research evidence to link the bacteria which were released with birth defects or any chronic illness such as multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease.

The Communications and Public Relations Department of Dorset Health Authority assisted DERA by providing comments on the final format of the material which they presented at the Roadshows held in Dorset to inform the general public about the experiments. The Authority did not send representatives to attend the Roadshows as it was felt important to maintain a distance between ourselves and the Ministry of Defence in order to demonstrate to the public that the Authority is an independent body. This is important to maintain public confidence in the Authority's ability impartially to investigate public concerns, not just about the germ warfare experiments but also other environmental issues such as electromagnetic radiation from power lines, chemical release from landfill sites and chemical emissions into the air from chemical factories in Dorset."

I want to reassure my constituents that, although the link to the experiments may be tenuous, we are taking the problems seriously.

I wrote to the Minister suggesting that he might have access to files that were not available to a Conservative Government. I was somewhat disappointed—although I do not blame him personally—that his correspondence section sent the letter on to DERA, with which I had already had a long correspondence. I understand from DERA that it has not even received the forwarded correspondence, although it had my letter telling it to ignore it because I was writing to the Minister again.

I hope that the Minister will shed as much light as possible on the matter from the MOD point of view, and that every facility will be provided to the Dorset health authority to help people from East Lulworth. If the problems come from a source other than the biological experiment, we want to know, so that we can take some action. I hope that the MOD will act expeditiously, and give as much help as possible.

9.58 am

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I should like to amplify in two respects the remarks made by my hon. Friends the Members for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) and for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce). I have had considerable correspondence from constituents about the problem, much of which relates specifically to West Dorset, where the recent roadshows and exhibitions were mainly held. I have also had various correspondence from the permanent secretary to the Ministry of Defence, and I want to thank him for the efforts he made to expand the scope of the roadshows, which were much appreciated in West Dorset.

I understand that some 27 field reports have been prepared. Of those, two are public knowledge so far. I believe—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

that two or three further reports are to be released roughly a year from now. That leaves more than 20 that are scheduled for release some years from now as they come up to their 30-year rule.

The secrecy of the field reports is generating, perhaps unnecessarily, a disproportionate amount of concern among my constituents, and, judging by the sedentary reactions of my hon. Friends, among theirs. People feel that those reports may contain material which would cast light on the issue, and that they cannot have access to it simply because of the 30-year rule. It may be that the reports contain matters of profound importance to national security which it would be inappropriate to release. Speaking as an amateur, I find it difficult to imagine that items which will be open to inspection a few years from now without compromising national security would compromise it if released now.

I urge the Minister to consider, upon a personal view of those papers, whether there is genuinely a case for retaining them in secrecy for as long as would normally be the practice, or whether, either in whole or in great part, those papers could be released earlier. That would certainly contribute to the reassurance that, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset, is urgently needed.

There is inevitably concern that the Ministry of Defence and other Government Departments and public authorities, including Dorset health authority are in some conspiracy. Very often, the belief that officialdom is in conspiracy is wholly false. My general supposition is that, when things go wrong, it is usually by mistake rather than by conspiracy.

Nevertheless, there is an understandable fear in this case. I do not believe that it will be resolved until and unless, in addition to the release of the field reports, steps are taken to establish a reputable, calm, dispassionate, scientific view of the matter. That could be achieved by appointing someone who is not an employee of Her Majesty's Government or a lurid, overblown scare raiser—the last thing we need—to review the field reports. It should be an expert who can reassure the public that nothing went wrong, if nothing did go wrong.

Such an expert could investigate in detail whether there were any grounds for supposing that there was a link between the problems experienced and the events to which we have referred this morning. Such an expert could produce a report much faster than a public inquiry or royal commission. He would have the same independence that one expects of such bodies. That is particularly important because, as my hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset and for Teignbridge said, increasing numbers of cases brought to the attention of constituency members are now being laid at the door of the experiments.

One farmer's cattle had a severe and unexplained set of problems. On investigation at Porton Down, it turned out that the problems were caused by a severe outbreak of E. coli. I have not the slightest idea whether there was any link between that outbreak and the experiments, but it is inevitable that, in the present climate, in the absence of release of the field reports or an independent investigation of any links, it is widely asserted that such a link exists. That is regrettable if it is not true. If it is true, it needs to be pinned down.

Therefore, I urge the Minister to release the reports and establish an independent expert quickly to review the matter.

10.4 am

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I congratulate the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on obtaining this Adjournment debate today. I thank *The Western Morning News* for its sensitive, non-sensational handling of this issue. The speeches by hon. Members this morning have also been non-sensationalist, and that is the way in which the issue should be treated.

It is difficult to prove beyond reasonable doubt the link between scientific substances known within the scientific community and medical conditions. The public need to be satisfied that the matter has been rigorously investigated, that all available information is freely available, and that nothing has been kept secret.

My attention is particularly drawn to a report from the biological research advisory board, which tested the bacteria on animals before releasing them. According to the report of the 51st meeting of the board, after tests on animals, the board approved

"the use of living non-pathogens in trials which might involve exposure of members of the public, subject to rigorous testing of every batch of material in animals."

So it is clear that there was no release into the atmosphere of the agents involved until after they had been tested on animals.

Nevertheless, in one of the field reports from the time, the methodology for toxicity tests on mice is recorded. In one, 20 mice were exposed to a cloud of E. coli cells for five minutes and then observed for seven days after, and the number of survivors recorded. In another, the lungs of mice exposed to a cloud of E. coli were examined for evidence of lesions, but the report failed to mention how many actually survived. That begs the question whether the so-called pre-testing was adequate to enable a judgment to be made that the bacteria should be released into the atmosphere, where they would be likely to come into contact with human beings.

My constituency is in the middle of the test area, between Portland and Plymouth. I was brought up in the area. I do not want anyone to draw any conclusions about that. I never thought that I had been exposed to germ warfare before I read *The Western Morning News*, and I suspect that many of my constituents thought the same. There is genuine concern among the population of the coastline and those who may have been around at the time. That is why the debate is important, and questions need to be answered.

Why were the experiments carried out? Who approved them, and what conclusions were drawn? Have all health authority records covering people resident along the coast from Portland to Plymouth been investigated to identify and further investigate any cluster of abnormalities? We know that some research has been done into health records in Dorset, but we do not know whether such an investigation has taken place in Devon.

Can the Minister inform us whether similar tests may have taken place in other parts of the country? These things have a habit of coming to light thanks to the vigilance of the press. Unless a similar informant speaks to the press in other areas, we will not know whether

other tests may have taken place. Should we not know? Why did tests take place only in Lyme bay? Perhaps there is a reason for that, which the Minister can give us, or perhaps he can tell us whether other areas were affected.

I look forward to the Minister's replies to my questions. I know that my constituents will be reassured if full information is made available, and there is no suspicion that anything is being hidden.

10.9 am

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): If the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls)—indeed, if any people—have had their health damaged as a result of Ministry of Defence trials, there is absolutely no doubt that every effort should be made to find out what happened. The Ministry of Defence and its agencies have a clear duty to do all they can to allay the fears of those concerned, and to assist the health authorities wherever possible. I have no doubt that they will be keen to do that—it is in their interests, and it is in everyone's interest.

It must be for the Minister to answer the charges laid by my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge. We on the Opposition Benches will listen with great interest and care to his detailed explanation, because my hon. Friend's debate raises some fundamental issues.

It is an irony that, as a direct consequence of the increasing openness of the Ministry of Defence under the current Government and under previous Governments, we have seen headlines in regional newspapers such as "End the secrecy on germ war tests" and "Disagreement over dangers of bacteria".

It is not surprising that our constituents have not read the scientific journals describing the work at Porton Down over many years. Aspects of the trial being debated today were first recorded in the scientific press in 1968; but, had it not been for documents released under the 30-year rule and the excellent road shows touring the country explaining the work of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, we would not be debating the issue today.

There must, inevitably and always, be secrecy and confidentiality surrounding our national defence interests—but only when it is genuinely necessary. I know from personal experience that, in respect of Porton Down, the Ministry of Defence always does all it can to be helpful in individual cases of personal health problems, and that records are always made available to general practitioners, wherever records are available and whenever doing so may be helpful.

There have been calls for a public inquiry, but it is hard to know what might be gained, because DERA has already put into the public domain much, if not all, of what there is to know. The agency even released the old black-and-white film of what happened all those years ago on board the ship off Portland.

The records are clear enough about the trials themselves, but explanation and reassurance are needed about the effects on the general public inland. I understand that a former Dorset county medical officer has come forward to say that the situation was monitored at the time, and there was no record of anything abnormal in the population. Let us examine that in more detail—I hope that we can be reassured that no abnormalities were recorded by the health authorities.

At this point, I wish to say a few words about Porton Down itself. With pride, I declare an interest as Member of Parliament for Porton Down. It amazes my constituents that Porton Down is used as a generic term for the two establishments based there. They are also amazed when they are accused of having some complicity in germ warfare.

We are not talking about germ warfare—we all know that this country gave up any aggressive capacity in that respect decades ago; what we are talking about is research and defence. Until 1979, the Ministry of Defence had at Porton Down the Microbiological Research Establishment and the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment. In 1979, they were divided: the Department of Health took over what became the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research, and the Ministry of Defence retained the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment.

Speaking as a former member of the Medical Research Council, I believe that it is extremely important that we in this country retain confidence in the scientific community at Porton Down and elsewhere. We are talking not about monsters, determined to do ill and create havoc, but about real people, with real families and normal concerns about everyday life and health issues, who make a huge contribution to the life of our community.

I know that all the staff at both the CBDE and CAMAR operate to the highest ethical standards, and that they are world-class scientists. I am proud of their contribution to science, to the health of the nation and to the world. I am proud of what they have achieved in raising standards of public health around the world through their contribution to research into cancer, AIDS and more common ailments. It is astonishing to me that anyone should question the motives of the scientists at Porton Down.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Although I echo my hon. Friend's tribute to the work at Porton Down and to the good sense of the scientists involved, would he not agree that to carry out perfectly safe experiments but not tell people would not be acceptable today? On that basis, surely we ought to have all the information that would have been released if the experiments of the past 30 years were going on today?

Mr. Key: I am delighted to acknowledge that my hon. Friend has stolen my final lines. Of course he is right—times have changed.

As constituency Member of Parliament for Porton Down, I have received inquiries about this issue and I have pursued them; but, since March, I have had no further representations from the local community, who are those most likely to be affected by any adverse reaction to the work of Porton Down. There is great local confidence in the work of the two establishments there, but I agree that we need to understand far more about why the experiments and trials are conducted in the first place.

The work is conducted primarily in order to protect our service men and women and the platforms or vehicles in which they work—be those helicopters, aircraft, ships, tanks, land rovers, tents or only protective suits.

Mr. Nicholls: I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend so rudely—it is hard to catch his eye when I am sitting right behind him. For the avoidance of any doubt, I wish

[Mr. Nicholls]

to emphasise that nowhere in my presentation did I criticise his constituents or the workers of Porton Down. I have no reason whatsoever to suspect that the standards applicable at the time were not followed to the hilt.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), I ask only that we should find out what happened. Unless we are about to hear some revelation from the Minister of State, which I suspect is unlikely, I have no criticism to make of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (Mr. Key) or of staff at Porton Down.

Mr. Key: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that reassurance, which I know will be noted by the scientific community at the Porton Down establishments and beyond.

We must understand that there are real threats. That fact is supported by the declarations made to the United Nations special commission by Iraq in the matter of its biological weapons programme, and by the use of a chemical weapon on the Tokyo subway shortly afterwards. There is no doubt that the threat exists, so we must understand how chemical and biological agents are dispersed and how they can be detected. That was what the trials we are debating were designed to discover, and the work done all those years ago was of real benefit to us all.

As for the incidents mentioned, I have been reassured by John Chisholm, the chief executive of DERA, who wrote to me on 20 March. He made it absolutely clear that

"The majority of these studies involved no release of biological material whatsoever and were conducted using organisms in different environmental conditions."

He also reassured me that

"The work in public areas would have been subject to clearance by Ministry of Defence committees, external to the research establishments concerned, before approval was given to go ahead."

He concluded:

"I must stress that the simulant substances that were released were harmless organisms commonly found in soil, grassland and hay throughout the United Kingdom and were not judged to present a risk to the general population."

It is of the greatest importance to the protection of service men and the general public that work at the two establishments at Porton Down continues—indeed, in an uncertain and unstable world, there is a strong case for enhancing and expanding the effort put into their work.

I warmly welcome the greater openness that we have seen at those establishments. I recognise that times have changed. The standards that were acceptable 30, 40 and more years ago are not acceptable today, and I am sure that the Government would wish to do all they can to be as open as possible in that respect.

However, we all need to put our minds to greater public education and awareness of what goes on at those establishments and why, and what we are protecting our troops and civilian communities at home for. If we can answer those questions, the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge will be much reassured, and so will everyone else.

10.19 am

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): I thank all those who have spoken this morning: the hon. Members for Totnes (Mr. Steen), who has had to go to a Committee meeting, for Torbay (Mr. Sanders), for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce), for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), and for Salisbury (Mr. Key). I congratulate the hon. Member for Teignbridge on having the good fortune and good sense to raise such an important issue. Hon. Members have raised this issue in an extremely responsible fashion, without being uncritical. I assure them that I am aware of both the anxieties and the importance which their constituents attach to it.

I shall refer to a number of issues raised by the hon. Member for Teignbridge and others, but if the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I shall refer first to a number of specific issues that were raised by the hon. Member for South Dorset.

The first was about a letter addressed to me, which was apparently diverted. My general rule on those matters is that, when a Member of Parliament writes to me, he is entitled to expect that the Minister will deal with the issue. I have caused inquiries to be made, and can confirm that the letter was received, and erroneously sent on to the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency.

In view of what the hon. Member for South Dorset said, I shall ensure that the letter receives the attention it deserves at DERA, but he may, as he said, wish to write to me again. This time, we shall see whether Wells Fargo manages to get the mail through to the Minister's office. I shall then personally answer the points that he raises.

The hon. Member for South Dorset then asked about ministerial approval, advice and so on. He is aware that the general convention that applies to all incoming Ministers is that we are not entitled to see the advice proffered by civil servants or others to previous Ministers. I am therefore somewhat restricted, as I cannot gain access to the personal papers.

Mr. Letwin: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Reid: If the hon. Gentleman will let me finish this point, it may satisfy his question.

At the time of the trials, the Ministry of Defence was advised on safety by part of the then Government's scientific advisory council, which was called the biological research advisory board—in the context of a Department that loves acronyms, he will be pleased to know that it was called BRAB—and included a range of independent and eminent academics. It is understood that Ministers were aware of the trials. The hon. Member for South Dorset raised that specific point, so I hope that that clears up any ambiguity.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I am grateful to the Minister for his response, but will he clarify the following point? The previous Minister made it clear that he could not see most of the ministerial advice given to the previous Labour Administration, and one accepts that rule. Given that the previous Minister could see everything that happened under the Conservative Administration—he gave me assurances about what was happening in that respect—can

the Minister return to the previous Labour Government's detailed memorandums, or are those banned from him as well?

Dr. Reid: I shall have that investigated. I understand that I am not entitled to go back to those papers. It is a matter not of party politics but of subsequent consecutive Administrations.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): It is to protect civil servants.

Dr. Reid: As the hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position, it is to protect civil servants, and the impartiality of their advice depends on such protection. If it did not exist, the advice given might be mitigated by a fear of future impingement on that confidentiality.

Mr. Alan Clark: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Reid: I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who has an esteemed past as a Defence Minister.

Mr. Clark: I am most grateful to the Minister for giving way, particularly as I have only just walked into this debate, although I listened to some of the earlier speeches.

Can the Minister confirm that documents will come into the public domain under the 30-year rule? That is a rolling process, and we hope that any advice tendered to his predecessors will soon be available for public scrutiny.

Dr. Reid: Yes, I can confirm that. I shall cover that general point in my speech, but at this stage I was dealing with the specific questions asked by the hon. Member for South Dorset. I thought that I was being specific enough by telling him, to clear up any ambiguities, that I understand that previous Ministers were aware of the trials.

Mr. Ian Bruce: The Minister knows that the noble Lord, Lord Healey has written to the Cabinet Secretary asking that the civil service look again at his past papers and advise him on whether he had been briefed. He denies that he was briefed about those tests, and says that he knew nothing about them. That gives rise to concern.

If the scientists did not tell the Minister, my constituents want to know what they had to hide. The Minister says that Lord Healey had been told about the trials. The House needs to know what was going on. We are more reassured if we know that the civil service and the MOD told the Minister of the day about the trials and what was going on.

Dr. Reid: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman is helping to clarify the issues by going into great detail. I can be no clearer than to say that previous Ministers were aware of the trials. I am aware of all the facts that the hon. Gentleman puts and of previous statements, but those events took place 30 years ago, and it is not always immediately apparent to those involved that every aspect of the issue was known to them at the time.

In the natural course of events, those involved would have caused investigations to be carried out, and would have written to people at the time asking for access to papers. I am giving the hon. Gentleman the latest position: I understand that previous Ministers were aware of the trials. That will be elaborated in due course by the then Ministers themselves, once they have access to the information and have satisfied themselves that they have an accurate picture of events.

Another question raised was whether the local health authority was told of the trials. Nothing in our records, which we have studied, shows who was informed of the trials. However, during the exhibitions in Dorset, to which the hon. Member for Teignbridge and others referred, we were informed by a then employee of the county emergency planning staff that elements of the local authority were aware of the trials. We have also been told that the area health authority, which collected regular medical returns, detected nothing abnormal during or after the trials.

Finally, I was asked a specific question about harmful effects on immuno-compromised people, or people with asthma. In recent years, some people have questioned whether extremely large doses of the material, to which I shall refer later, that was used during the tests causes a problem in certain people, such as immuno-compromised people. I do not suggest that that means anyone to whom hon. Members have referred, but people with AIDS, for example, are classified as immuno-compromised. Although no specific studies have been carried out, the experts consulted do not believe that there would be a problem. Of course, the number of immuno-compromised people in the 1960s was very much smaller than it is now, and such people would be at much greater risk from the large number of other bacteria and viruses present in the atmosphere all the time than they would be from the four to which we shall refer today.

With reference to asthma, there are a large number of bacteria, viruses and other particles of biological origin, such as pollen and fungal spores, in the air all the time. There are no special features of BG—B. globigii—or E. coli that make them any more likely to cause asthma than all the organisms to which people are exposed all their lives.

I have dealt in some detail with those specific points, because I know that the hon. Gentleman and others have taken an interest in the matter over the years.

I listened carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Teignbridge, which, because of his courtesy, I had been able to read in advance. I do not regard the subject as a matter of party politics; it is a matter of national interest, and I am gratified by the way in which it was handled by the hon. Gentleman. I was entirely in accord with that. One would expect a good constituency representative to raise issues that are of particular importance to his constituents.

I listened closely to the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful speech, and to those of other hon. Members. I shall deal with the main issues that he addressed, and if he wants to raise specific points, he will no doubt come back to me during the debate or in writing.

I am aware that the subject is, naturally, of great concern in the west country. I have read with close attention the articles that appeared in the local, and more recently the national, press, and I am therefore pleased to take the opportunity to respond to the points raised this morning.

[Dr. Reid]

Before I deal with the hon. Gentleman's specific concerns, I hope that he will allow me to establish for the record some basic facts on which I hope we can all agree. I do so because it is important that the House understands—as I do now, having been briefed in considerable detail—the background to the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises.

The debate relates essentially to a series of trials carried out in the 1960s and 1970s by the former Microbiological Research Establishment, or MRE, at Porton Down. I should make it clear that MRE closed in 1979. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, or DERA, is now responsible for activities at Porton Down.

The tests to which we refer are those that scientists would probably prefer to call biological defence trials. We call them germ warfare tests, which is easier for ordinary people to understand, but the term provokes visions of dangers that might not be borne out when one realises what the tests involved.

The tests were carried out because, during the icy confrontation of the cold war, there was a real concern that infectious, disease-causing biological agents could be used to attack not only our armed forces, but the mainland of the United Kingdom. In retrospect, that may appear an idle invention, but it was not. It was a hard-headed assessment made at the time of a potentially terrifying threat to the British people.

The trials were designed to assess the potential impact of a biological attack on our country, and to determine what level of protection would be needed. The fearful consequences of such an attack, were it to be launched, need no amplification for hon. Members.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): In support of the Minister's remarks, may I point out that, in 1992, President Yeltsin confirmed what had been suspected by western intelligence agencies for a long time: that, for 20 years, the Soviet Union had been breaching the 1972 biological weapons convention, whereby it was supposed to have abolished all its offensive biological weapons stocks, and had been carrying out detailed and intensive research on anthrax and other deadly diseases.

Dr. Reid: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who we all know has an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of such matters. From my less than encyclopaedic knowledge, I can confirm my memory that that is correct. That revelation was made, as the hon. Gentleman says, within the past six years. Indeed, there is some concern that, even at that point, without the President's full knowledge and authority, the research was still being carried on. Such revelations during the past decade show that the attitude taken 20 years previously was not as melodramatic as it might seem in the more relaxed atmosphere of a thaw in the icy confrontation.

Faced with a dreadful perceived threat, scientists at the time needed to answer important questions, not as a matter of abstract scientific pursuits or as research for the sake of research, but with the practical implication of discharging the first duty of a Government—the protection of their citizens.

Scientists needed to know how far a cloud of bacteria would travel, how long organisms would survive in atmospheric conditions, and how such a cloud could be detected. All those questions had important practical implications for any counter-measures against biological attack.

To determine the answers to those questions, a range of trials was carried out. Some, which took place in many parts of southern England, involved the exposure of micro-organisms to the atmosphere in special apparatus, so that the bacteria were not released at all.

I am well aware that the natural secrecy with which such tests had to be carried out provokes even greater speculation about the meaning of terms such as "special apparatus". Hon. Members will have read accounts that special apparatus was used on London bridge. I can tell hon. Members that they need not worry; I can show them that special apparatus, which I understand is no longer classified. Some of the wilder visions of what it involved can be put to rest by opening up a little of the secrecy. The special apparatus is no longer being used, hon. Members will be pleased to know.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Minister, but the House is not used to demonstrations of the kind that he has just made. It will be difficult to record it in the context of the debate, unless he will be good enough to describe what he has produced before the House.

Dr. Reid: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. That is precisely why I brought the apparatus with me. I was not quite sure how one would describe it. It is almost like a fish knife without a middle in it. It is a rectangular piece of metal approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ in long with a 2 in handle extended on it, round which was wrapped an extremely thin thread, almost of the dimension of a spider's web, which held within it a small number of such bacteria. The apparatus was carried on Waterloo bridge and elsewhere to expose it to the atmosphere, then put away and tested to see whether the bacteria had been killed by the atmosphere. It was as simple as that.

I hope that I have dispelled any visions of London being swamped by bacteria through the use of such special equipment. Hon. Members have heard my description, and I hope that they are somewhat relieved.

During his measured speech, the hon. Member for Teignbridge referred in passing to trials involving the release of micro-organisms far offshore while testing protective measures for ships and their crews. I cannot say that no material from those trials drifted overland, although that was not the intention of the tests. However, that possible outcome was not monitored, so I cannot provide any results.

The third category of tests to which hon. Members referred specifically has attracted the most attention.

Mr. Letwin: I think that hon. Members will understand that the Minister cannot give a guarantee whether the far offshore trials led to a dispersion of micro-organisms over land. However, can he give some assessment as to the likelihood that that occurred? Presumably he has been reassured by officials that the likelihood is very small, but it would be interesting to know the percentages.

Dr. Reid: I cannot give a guarantee, because it was never intended that the tests would involve bacteria

reaching land. The trials were conducted far offshore, so there was no monitoring on the land. However, the bacteria used in the tests do not last very long in a polluted atmosphere.

Some less concentrated or minute traces of bacteria may have reached land, so it is impossible for me to guarantee that no bacteria landed anywhere. However, the second series of tests was conducted so far from shore that it is extremely unlikely—that was the assumption at the time—that the bacteria would have caused land-based infection. When I describe the bacteria that were used in the third test, I think that the hon. Gentleman will be even more reassured. That point was at the heart of the contribution by the hon. Member for Teignbridge.

The third group of trials generated the most public interest, because it was intended that the bacteria would be carried on to the mainland by on-shore winds, and they may have travelled over populated areas with houses, places of work and other buildings. The hon. Gentleman asked for some clarification as to the range of the tests—was it five or 10 miles inland? I think—I speak from memory and not from notes—that the range was 40 or 50 miles inland.

There were good reasons for choosing Lyme bay as the trial site. Its geography meant that the trials could proceed in a variety of wind conditions. Its location was also convenient to the naval base at Portland and to Porton Down, which helped with setting up the trials and collecting the results.

For those trials that involved the release of micro-organisms in Lyme bay, bacteria levels were monitored over the mainland. In those trials, the Microbiological Research Establishment used a specially adapted experimental trials vessel, Icewhale, which was equipped to spray material from the rear of the vessel into the onshore wind. The exact course that the ship sailed, and the position of the land-based sampling sites on each trial, were determined by several factors, including weather conditions. The samples collected from the detectors behind the ship and from the land-based sampling stations were taken for scientific analysis in the laboratory.

I must reassure hon. Members that the scientists did not use real biological agents in those experiments, but four species of bacteria that would mimic the behaviour of real agents. Two of the bacteria, bacterium aerogenes and serratia marcescens, were killed before use. They were dead bacteria, and as such they would have been incapable of growing and of producing disease. Those species were used in only a limited number of trials.

Hon. Members may ask: if the bacteria were dead, why were they used? I remind them that one purpose of the tests was to see, among other things, how biological agents would be carried by weather conditions. Another purpose was to measure how long live bacteria would last in the atmosphere. Although the bacteria used were dead, they were still traced. They were covered with a translucent coat—I think it was purple—that allowed the bacteria, though dead, to be detected as they came ashore.

The other two species of bacteria that were used in the majority of the trials occur naturally in the environment, and most people are exposed to them many times during their lifetimes. The first organism, B. globigii—which, thankfully, is commonly referred to as BG—occurs widely in soil, dust, hay and water, and is naturally present in large amounts during the autumn. It would be inhaled simply by walking in the countryside, and material disturbed during harvesting is likely to be released in high concentrations.

Hon. Members will be pleased to know that I asked what would happen if the organism were found in larger quantities and higher concentrations than normal. I was assured that there is no evidence that it would cause any particular ailment, and certainly no long-term damage.

The second micro-organism, E. coli strain MRE 162, causes concern because of its generic name. It is one of the many different strains of the E. coli species, in which I take a particular interest, given my constituency background and last year's tragic incidents. Many of the E. coli species are part of the normal flora of the intestines of man and animals. They are part of the background atmospheric rumble, both outside and inside human beings and animals.

Unlike some strains of the organism, MRE 162 does not produce harmful toxins. I stress that it is quite different from the strain that caused recent food poisoning epidemics in Scotland. Each batch was tested before use at the time, and its safety was reaffirmed recently by independent tests at the Central Public Health Laboratory using the most up-to-date technology. In this case—which I presume is the most worrying for hon. Members—we are relying not purely on 30-year-old assertions, but upon recent evidence as well.

Several hon. Members asked whether the trials were useful. I have been advised that they were extremely useful, providing a considerable amount of important information about the progress and survival of micro-organisms released close to the United Kingdom, as might happen in a biological attack.

For example, scientists were able to calculate the concentration of surviving organisms at different times and different distances from their source of release, and how that related to their size and meteorological conditions. In light of my description, hon. Members may assert that some results may contain information that we would not wish to disperse to anyone who might seek it. I shall return to that point.

Information gathered from these trials proved invaluable for assessing what measures would be needed to protect Britain and its people from a biological attack. The results obtained also contributed to the development of computer models that were used as late as the Gulf war to help plan to protect the UK armed forces should Saddam Hussein have used his biological weapons.

Hon. Members will know—they will need no reminding, since they read newspapers and watch television, and heard my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who answered a private notice question in the Chamber on Monday—that this is, of course, still a very live issue. Indeed, it is at the centre of some of the tensions that have arisen recently in the Gulf. When I refer to the release of information, I hope that it will be accepted that it is not merely convention, paranoia or natural secrecy that causes me not to give absolute assurances on these matters, although I will try to be as helpful as I can.

One of the contentious questions that cause concern today—not least to the hon. Member for Teignbridge—is, of course, whether the general public should have been told about the trials before they took place. Several

[Dr. Reid]

hon. Members raised that point. At the time, almost certainly for reasons of national security, the trials to simulate the impact of a biological attack on the United Kingdom were kept secret, although information subsequently became available in the form of reports placed in the Public Record Office at Kew.

As I have said before, it is important to remember that, at the time of the trials—more than 30 years ago—before the general thaw that we seem almost to take for granted today, there was a general disposition to keep defence matters very much under wraps. It goes without saying that biological warfare was a particularly secretive area. Certainly MRE would not have wanted to release any information that might have helped a potential aggressor, any more than I would wish to do so today.

Some of the detailed data remain sensitive. There is a fine balance to be struck between helping those with aggressive intentions and, on the other hand, informing people with a legitimate interest in what is going on.

I have given reasons why the trials were kept secret, although I accept that, if we were considering such trials today, they would not take place without some publicity—however constrained—and with greater information than would have been expected and was the convention some 30 years ago. Nevertheless, the existence of the trials has been in the public domain for many years, and in the past year in particular much more information has been placed in the Public Record Office.

The Defence Evaluation and Research Agency also held, as several hon. Members mentioned, a series of informative exhibitions during September 1997. Those exhibitions, in Dorchester, Weymouth and Bridport, were aimed specifically at explaining the background and facts surrounding the biological defence trials in the Dorset area, and gave many people the opportunity to talk to scientists and to find out exactly what took place.

The hon. Gentleman's other main—and entirely legitimate—concern was whether the trials presented any hazard to the health of the people living in his area, and in the areas of other hon. Members.

Let me be quite clear about this. The scientists who carried out the trials concluded at the time that they in no way posed a threat to human life. A current evaluation of the work has reaffirmed that conclusion. I referred to some of that work earlier as regards bacteria. None of the experiments would have been carried out if there had been any doubt about the effects on public safety. They were designed with the sole and exclusive purpose of ensuring public safety, and no harmful reactions were reported at the time.

Nevertheless, I do know of the anxieties, and that a number of concerns have been voiced since the existence of these experiments came to light. In particular, as the hon. Member for Teignbridge, and others, mentioned, a number of people have suffered, or some within their family group have suffered, serious and largely unexplained illness, and they believe that the trials may have had something to do with their specific medical problems.

I have every sympathy with their search for answers and explanations, and I would use this occasion—as no doubt the hon. Gentleman would—to urge them, if they have suspicion about this, to approach their health authority, which has, in any case, just commissioned a statistical survey of the incidence of birth defects in the area covered by the trials.

Of course, the trials, as several hon. Members said, are just one of a number of potential factors that would need to be considered if any causal relationship was being studied. Nevertheless, it almost goes without saying that, if the health authority were to decide that there was a case to be investigated, I—and my Ministry—would, of course, be more than willing to assist them and to give them any help they wanted in interpreting the data, most of which are already in the public domain.

Mr. Nicholls: I am sure that the public will be greatly reassured by the way in which the Minister has handled this. He has given a painstaking explanation, and I am very grateful to him for it. However, I ask him to clarify one thing.

Is he saying that some of the information in documents that have yet to be released is still so sensitive that it will be exempt from the 30-year disclosure? If the information is sensitive today but is releasable in a year, 18 months or two years' time, the case for its release may not be very attractive to civil servants, but, from a political perspective, which the Minister will understand completely, there could be a very good reason indeed for releasing it now. Which of those two categories does the information fall into?

Dr. Reid: I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman that I have read the other 27 documents—I have not. However, I shall look at this and review the risk, in my view, of releasing information, which on its own is sometimes not dangerous but which, when added incrementally to other information in the public sphere, can be of great use to a potential enemy. I will balance that against the political requirements. I will be as open and honest as I can. I will have two caveats, because this is not completely in my power to handle.

Mr. Key *rose—*

Dr. Reid: I shall give way briefly to the hon. Gentleman, but I really must finish now.

Mr. Key: I shall be brief. I am very grateful to the Minister for the way in which he has conducted the debate. He is not a scientist, and nor am I, but we are both concerned for constituents who are genuinely worried about any ill health that they may feel goes from generation to generation. Is it the Minister's understanding, as it is mine, that, even though no dangerous pathogens were released, if chemical or biological agents which were real had been released, their effects would have taken place within minutes or hours, and we would not be talking about something happening 30 years later?

Dr. Reid: That depends on which bacteria were released, but, yes, in most cases, that certainly would have been the case. I understand that, because, for very good reasons, many of these matters had to be kept secret at the time—some of them, perhaps, even now—people's suspicions are naturally heightened. That is not automatically the case. There are very good reasons for

having kept some of this secret. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that, if the health authority were to decide that there is a case to be investigated, we will be willing to assist it, in interpreting the data in particular.

In the meantime, some of the formal scientific reports relating to these trials have already been routinely released—in the normal way—into the Public Record Office at Kew. The remainder are in the process of being so released.

I have no unconstrained power in my office to order release. There is the 30-year rule. Other Departments are involved in this. It is not entirely within my gift. There may, of course, be matters that relate specifically to future security.

However, I can tell the House that, in discussions with Porton Down, I have made my own view known, and have asked that whatever steps can be taken by my office to assist the processes being accelerated should be taken. I have also ordered that copies of reports so far published, and any others that are published, are placed in the Library of the House to make it easier for hon. Members to access them rather than having to send to Porton Down or anywhere else. I hope that that is of some assistance.

I hope that my commitment to be open and honest in dealing with the public on these issues, and to offer assistance to the local authorities where we sensibly can, together with the facts that I have set out this morning, will offer some reassurance to those living in the localities in which the tests took place.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Teignbridge for bringing these issues to my attention, and for providing me with the opportunity publicly to respond to the points that he made; and to assure him and his colleagues that, as far as the Ministry of Defence is concerned, we will do whatever we can to reassure the public and address his constituents' anxiety.

Housing

10.59 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am grateful for the opportunity to debate one of the biggest issues that face us as we enter the next millennium: where people are going to live. I do not intend to speak for long, because I know how many other hon. Members wish to speak.

On entering the House, I was somewhat surprised to find how little national debate there had been about this subject, despite the last Government's paper entitled "Household growth: where shall we live?" and a report on housing need by the Environment Select Committee. Given its importance and relevance to every constituency, and therefore to every Member of Parliament, it is surprising what a low public profile the issue has had. Many of us have had to deal with housing development in our own localities.

Housing has slipped down the public agenda, despite fulfilling a basic human need, and is frequently perceived as a purely local and technical matter. Because of that, housing development figures are seen to be irrefutable and handed down from above, although they should be a key element in debate with the public. We all know that housing is one of the issues that should gain resonance during general elections, but recently it has failed to feature.

The Department of the Environment published the latest set of household projections in 1995. The figures predicted a 4.4 million, or 23 per cent., increase in the number of households in England between 1991 and 2016, and have been used to determine the level and location of new housing development across the country. What is emerging is the existence of localised planning disputes focusing on the specifics of individual sites and the question of where the housing should go. What is being missed is the bigger picture, and questions about whether the housing figures are valid or indeed desirable, whether their impact is acceptable in economic, social and environmental terms and whether they amount to a coherent strategy.

In my constituency, there is growing resentment about plans for thousands of extra houses, which has resulted in many letters in my postbag. For much of my time as a local councillor, I have been personally involved with development and planning, and I understand the frustration felt by many local residents. I believe that the time has come when we must be prepared to question the basis of the housing projections, particularly if we want to be a listening Government.

I want to raise three specific concerns: the validity and repercussions of the housing figures, the issue of sustainability and the role of public policy in housing. The current projection of 4.4 million additional households is based on the assumption that the future is simply a continuation of past trends, and, in particular, that demographic changes, migration patterns and social behaviour will continue much as before. That is admitted in the last Government's paper on household growth, although in other areas of policy such as road building the "predict and provide" approach is now being seriously questioned, primarily on grounds of environmental impact.

Research by Professor Glen Bramley of Heriot-Watt university has highlighted the circularity of the relationship between household projections and economic

[Mr. David Drew]

and housing market factors—the influence of the supply of housing on demand, and vice versa. That has much in common with the road-building and traffic debate.

Let me now deal with some of the specific factors that generate housing numbers: an aging population, the fact that younger people are leaving home earlier, the growing divorce and separation rate, the existence of more single-person households and migration flows across the country, essentially from urban to rural areas and from north to south. I am particularly interested in that last feature, because of the dynamic that migration causes in parts of the country. In the south-west, it generates development as much as indigenous growth. We must therefore subject the figures to thorough scrutiny.

Research carried out over the past two years by John Allinson of the University of the West of England on net migration into Gloucestershire raises serious doubts about the robustness of the net in-migration figures being used to determine the massive house-building programme, and an approach based entirely on past trends rather than public policy. In its structure plan, Gloucestershire county council assumes a net annual in-migration of 2,700 people, but Allinson demonstrates that the true figure is much lower. In his view, that is due to emerging societal sea changes relating principally to labour and housing markets.

The real significance of John Allinson's research, however, lies in what he has to say about migration patterns beyond Gloucestershire at regional and national levels. The overall implications are simple but dramatic. In Gloucestershire, planners are about to make provision for some 6,000 more houses than are required, thereby needlessly and irreversibly destroying hundreds of acres of green-field land. The reduction in net migration flows that is increasingly evident in Gloucestershire is being replicated in the other counties in the south-west and in other regions, and is part of a wider national trend. Moreover, public policy can have an impact on migration between areas of the country, and, in particular, out of our cities.

Although the research only examines the migration element of the household projections, that element accounts for more than half the predicted growth in Gloucestershire, and is therefore significant. However, there are other aspects of the key assumption that raise doubts about the overall soundness of the projections and the methodology employed. For example, the figures assume virtually no increase in the proportion of households in which people are cohabiting, which rose from 2.9 per cent. to 6.4 per cent. between 1981 and 1991. It is projected to have risen by only 0.3 per cent. between 1991 and 2016, which reinforces the thesis of a massive growth in single-person households.

The figures do not appear to have been adjusted for the estimated missing million people who failed to complete the 1991 census, thereby reducing the average household size and, again, reinforcing the thesis of a smaller household—a case of "Honey, I shrunk the household". That provides strong evidence that the household figures are open to challenge, are likely to be a significant overestimate and therefore need to be reviewed as part of a reappraisal of housing requirements.

Given the consequences for local economies, communities and the environment, the accumulated data must be acted on. The numbers will be affected, directly and indirectly, by policy decisions. For example, a substantial regional investment creating jobs eventually affects migration from, for instance, the north to the south. Social, affordable housing provision designed to meet the local needs of those on low incomes—the homeless and young indigenous people—is more effective than massive increases in housing supply at lower prices.

Similarly, changing patterns of student study may encourage students to stay in their home environment, and improvements in standards in urban schools may persuade families to stay in the cities. We therefore have serious doubts about trend-based forecasts that take the last 20 years, and roll the findings forward into the next 20 and make the result the main presumption behind housing needs.

Next, let me deal with sustainability. Notwithstanding the arguments, we must consider how the housing debate can be advanced. The concept of sustainability needs to be central. More clarity and a higher priority are required before its implications for economies, communities and the environment can be properly weighed within a modernised planning system. Associated issues of capacity and environmental impact assessment are also essential if we are to have more integrated evolutionary planning.

One way in which we could reduce development pressures without absolving ourselves of responsibility for unforeseen changes, while maintaining a coherent planning strategy, would be to introduce the phasing of land allocation for development. Programmed reviews of need would be built in, and, perhaps, land would be released on a sequential basis designed to enhance sustainability and the regeneration of local economies and communities, and to discourage cherry-picking of the best green-field sites.

Another associated issue is the use of brown-field sites in preference to green-field sites. In principle, that approach supports the notion that minimising the impact on the environment should largely determine the location of new housing. The last Government suggested in a White Paper a target of 50 per cent. building on brown-field sites, and more recently the United Kingdom round table on sustainable development has suggested a 75 per cent. target.

The identification of brown-field sites has posed difficulties, and local authorities need to make a greater effort. A system of incentives and constraints is required if less attractive or costly sites are to be provided. Nevertheless, those high targets are likely to prove unrealistic. Brown-field sites are not evenly distributed across the country, and the impact on the urban environment needs to be considered carefully.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I have been listening with much interest to the hon. Gentleman's speech. Does he agree that, to an extent, the use of brown-field sites is a question of urban renewal? If we built sensible housing—dare I say, what abroad would be termed apartments, and what people wish to live in in Paris—instead of building detached housing in the countryside, in which people are encouraged to live, we would kill two

birds with one stone. We would renew the cities without destroying the countryside of which the hon. Gentleman has spoken so eloquently.

Mr. Drew: I agree with the hon. Member. Planning policies should reflect that, so that we prevent an attack on our countryside and make urban centres places where people want to live.

To degrade the quality of life in cities through excessive development will, ultimately, prove to be disastrous for the countryside, as it will inevitably lead to further migration.

If we are to wean people off the car, we must think hard about where development is placed, and how sufficient jobs can be created locally. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that that has been successful. Too often, the locus for new development is road systems, and jobs have to follow people. That results in settlements that are essentially commuter land. Sadly, where such developments have occurred, rather than adding to the social mix, younger people are driven out and jobs go with them.

Those features are only too apparent in my constituency. Stroud is currently having to implement a new county structure plan as well as attempting its own local plan. The area faces considerable constraints, because 50 per cent. of the district is designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty, another 27 per cent. runs along the Severn estuary, much of which is a site of international ecological importance, and a significant remainder of the district is prime agricultural land or has conservation area status. Less than 5 per cent. of the land is considered brown-field, much of which is already designated for employment purposes.

Outside those constraints, there are areas of immense sensitivity. The late Laurie Lee's Slad valley has no protective designation, and was subject to a recent planning inquiry, which was thankfully turned down. Does anyone pretend that that is acceptable?

Despite those constraints, this summer Stroud district council produced a draft plan for consultation. It has encouraged the involvement in that process of parish and town councils and the general public. In a survey of the entire district, 70 per cent. of those who responded supported a dispersal strategy as opposed to a new settlement, which was the favoured option of the county council initially and which would have had a devastating impact on the environment and on the economies of local market towns, especially Stroud.

Stroud district council is now attempting a bottom-up approach to resolve difficulties. It is too early to say whether that bold approach will be successful, but it must be the way forward, provided that the numbers are realistic and account is taken of the constraints.

There is a need to understand the specific dynamics of our rural areas, but that is not to argue that, as an alternative, houses should be crammed into cities. The message is that the future health and sustainability of the countryside is dependent on the health and sustainability of our cities.

We must revise the approach that resulted in urban and rural policies being entirely separate spheres, and we should examine the relationship between the two as a basis of a clearer vision of what both want. Protection of the countryside must go hand in hand with a strong, urban policy.

I want to comment on the planning system. I would argue for a proper, plan-led system to enable communities better to control their environment and to meet local needs, and to bring certainty into the process. That would overcome the policy and practice in recent years that allowed market forces to dominate.

One of my concerns is provision for windfall sites, which undermines the certainty of a plan-led system. The Council for the Protection of Rural England argues that windfalls should be adequately accounted for by local authorities. In particular, a plan-led system would provide for a specific number of homes to be built, which would reassure village communities that a precedent is not being created for excessive development in the future. A plan-led system should also allow proper provision for social housing to deal with homelessness and social exclusion, rather than having to rely on piggy-backing private development.

I support the Government's regional strategy. I advocate combining the capacity that it offers with the development of a broad planning policy with a bottom-up approach that involves people in the creation of sustainable, revitalised communities.

I would welcome a visit to Gloucestershire by the Minister, not to get him embroiled in protracted local issues, but to engage him in a wide discussion on the Government's thinking on how the planning system could be improved.

The Government have been criticised by the Conservative party for not listening to the interests of the countryside. I hope that, by initiating this debate, I have shown that Labour Members are genuinely concerned with the real issues of the countryside, and that we will play our part in this major issue. We have shown our concern through local Agenda 21—or Vision 21 as we call it in Gloucestershire—whereby factors such as sustainability have been discussed. In its own way, that could be a model for the future. It is through such initiatives and getting people involved that we shall begin to find answers to what otherwise seems to be an intractable problem.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. It is clear that several hon. Members are trying to catch my eye. Brevity will assist.

11.14 am

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew). He even acknowledged that Conservative Members are suspicious that Labour Members have no care for the countryside. I was grateful for his contribution, and I shall listen carefully to ensure that the Minister agrees with him, and with the vast majority of Conservative Members, that we must do much more to preserve the countryside that we all enjoy, irrespective of whether we live in the country or the town.

I am not speaking from a NIMBYist "not in my backyard" position. I shall talk about the importance of preserving the countryside in my area, but I shall also refer to the commitment of certain villages in my constituency to the need to give some of their land for extra housing.

[Mr. Nigel Evans]

The previous Government's commitment to the preservation of the environment was second to none. We shall be careful to ensure that that commitment is carried on by the new Government. The previous Secretary of State for the Environment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), said in a debate only last week that he could recall only one occasion on which he gave permission to build on a green-field site. The new Government have a lot to live up to. When she was Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher said that we were merely leaseholders of this land for future generations. It is a full, repairing lease, so we have a lot of work to do.

Conservative Members are suspicious not only of the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), but of the Government's commitment to agriculture, especially in less-favoured areas. Agriculture is part of the countryside that we all enjoy. The £60 million in hill livestock compensatory allowances for last year will be taken away for this year, and that will be a terrible deprivation for farmers. That is one of the reasons why Conservative Members are so concerned.

There is much concern about the problems that new homes in the countryside bring with them. We have to put up with extra traffic from tourists and those who come to live in the countryside, and extra pressure is caused by the erection of telecommunication masts, wind turbines and pylons. The countryside is under attack not just from housing, but from other pressures.

Several reports over the summer—primarily in *The Sunday Times*—claimed that the Government are preparing to relax restrictions on the building of up to 2 million new homes in the countryside. The reports claimed that millions of acres of green-field land, such as the green-belt land between Hemel Hempstead and Stevenage, could be converted into housing estates.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the report of the Round Table on Sustainable Development, which said that 75 per cent. of extra housing could be built on brown-field sites. If the Government are sufficiently committed to that, it will be done. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) said that we should consider different ways of providing the extra housing that will be necessary due to changing demographics and people's changing needs.

It has been estimated that, without any restrictions, the countryside will have to find room for at least 2 million more homes. Current figures from the Council for the Protection of Rural England show that, 270,000 acres of countryside will each year be flooded with concrete by developers. That is equivalent to 250,000 football pitches. The CPRE reckons that, by 2016, an area the size of Hampshire will have been lost—and that is before the relaxation of current restrictions.

Imagine how much worse it would be if the Government allowed building on green-field sites. I do not dispute that extra housing is needed, but we have to be careful exactly where we put it all. How turning much of our green and pleasant land into an urban jungle will solve the problems of neglected inner cities is beyond me.

I have already seen what plans to build on small villages can do to an area. The hon. Member for Stroud talked about his constituency; 75 per cent. of my constituency is an area of outstanding natural beauty. That means that, in many ways, there is much more pressure on the rest of the constituency. People think that there is a straight demarcation line: they are either in the AONB or outside it. Of course, much of the area leads up to the AONB, so it is all part of the countryside that people enjoy.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. Does he accept that in constituencies such as his, or mine on the fringe of the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty and green belt, there is reinforced pressure for development because they lie just beyond the fringe of areas where restraint is obligatory?

Mr. Evans: Of course I accept that. Because they enjoy the countryside in the area of outstanding natural beauty, people live as close as they can to it; it is on their doorstep. They do not realise that, as all this building is going on there, they are helping to scar and to encroach on AONBs and to damage the very thing that they love, so we have to be guarded about that.

On villages with surrounding AONBs, as I have said, in my constituency Barrow has taken on more than 200 houses. That does not sound like a lot, but it is double the size of the village. Clitheroe, another area around my constituency, is one of the larger market towns and it has taken on several hundred houses, which are dotted all over the place. Each application does not sound like an awful lot—some are for only about 70 or 100 houses—but they all take up different green-field sites dotted around the town.

One green-field site is taken up after another, although each application is for only one more green-field site. Over years, several green-field sites have been taken over. They are disappearing by stealth, and we must guard against such applications.

In Ribchester, a brown-field site has been used for extra housing: it is a mixed development of affordable housing and less affordable housing. I have no problems with that at all, although there was much concern among villagers about all the extra housing coming in. However, the new development has married well with the village.

Longridge has also given over some extra fields to housing. As the name would suggest, Fulwood—which is near the Preston end of the constituency, which is more urban—was at some stage a wood. Now we can drop the word "wood" and just have the word "full", because just four green-field sites are left.

The Commission for the New Towns owns those four fields. I and residents in the area have had many meetings with the CNT, trying to appeal to it. We know that it has an obligation to get the best price for the land, and one of the ways in which to do that is obviously to secure planning permission for houses on it, but we have asked the CNT to be a little compassionate and to have regard to all the extra housing that has been built in the Fulwood area—some "lungs" are necessary for all the people who have moved into the extra housing. We have had some constructive meetings with the CNT, and I hope that they will continue.

My constituency has also suffered from the fact that three large institutions have virtually all closed, apart from one that is now half in operation. They are former

mental institutions of the Victorian style, which housed 3,000 patients. As they have closed, they have become ripe for sell-off and for housing then to be built there. Because those large institutions were not too far away from other villages, which used to supply much of the work force, there is now tremendous pressure for the old hospitals to be flattened and for developments of 1,000 houses to be put on those areas, with little regard to the fact that there are only 500 houses in the neighbouring village.

Again, we ask the Minister to consider those sites carefully. No one is discounting the fact that, once the hospitals disappear, building can go on to the footprint of the old hospital site, but people resent green fields around the old hospital being given up so that extra housing can go on to those green-field sites as well, totally swamping the old villages, with little regard for the infrastructure, never mind the fact that doctors' surgeries and schools cannot cope with the extra numbers.

One of the deals is to say to developers, "You can put on these extra houses so long as you give us extra money to build an extra school." It is called planning gain. I plead with the Minister: there is such a thing as non-planning gain. One of the reasons why people go to live in or visit the countryside is because conditions in cities and towns are not replicated there. Certain people, as we have already heard, want to live in cities and towns, and we have to regenerate those areas to ensure that they can do so. It is done in other countries and we should be looking to do it more here. That will also work as a safety valve for less building in the countryside, so that people can come from cities and towns and enjoy the countryside as well.

I ask the Minister, therefore, to consider carefully those old hospital sites. Many other institutions are past their sell-by date and there is now tremendous pressure for them to be turned into something else. Another one, called Whittingham, an old mental institution, has been flattened and there is tremendous pressure to put 1,000 houses on that site as well. There are about 500 houses in the local village, and villagers are protesting. We have the support of the local council to ensure that the development is down to about 375 houses, so it is not true that we do not want any houses there. We accept that some building will take place, but we ask for sensitivity to ensure that the developments are as small as possible.

I shall now bring my remarks to a close because I know that many other hon. Members want to speak about the problems in their constituencies, and the more people talk about their anecdotal evidence, the stronger the case will be. In many cases, building on green fields is viewed as cheaper, but it will have an enormous cost, which will be borne by all of us and by future generations, if we allow it to go ahead. Those future generations have no say at the moment and we have to speak up on their behalf as well, so that they can enjoy what we are enjoying currently.

11.26 am

Ms Tess Kingham (Gloucester): I support much of what my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) has said. However, representing an urban constituency, I view the issue of the 40,000 to 50,000-plus new homes to be developed in our county from a slightly different perspective.

Perhaps I feel a little sensitive that my constituency, the city of Gloucester, might be an easy target for the new developments and the tens of thousands of new homes that we have to accommodate on our doorstep, because the recent history of growth has been one of incremental development on the boundary of Gloucester. Often, housing estates have sprung up on the edges of the city, where the agenda has been set predominantly by developers rather than by the communities that have to sustain themselves for future generations.

I have another anecdotal, but perhaps briefer, example. Quedgeley in my constituency has about 10,000 residents. It is a big new development on the southern part of Gloucester city. It was originally developed as part of Stroud district, but the residents, being so close to Gloucester, needed to rely to on Gloucester for services, for transport and for everything that is required to sustain a community.

Eventually, therefore, the city boundaries were changed and Quedgeley became a welcome part of our city. However, the people there now feel let down because, over time, they have realised that they have nice houses, but little else. They have a poor transport network after bus deregulation, few community services, few pre-school services and poor shopping facilities.

Abbeymead is another big estate that has been bolted on to the east of the city. It comprises very nice houses—predominantly three to four-bedroom or smaller detached houses that attract young families. Yet, once again, it is a developer-led settlement rather than a community-led settlement, so residents have little access to good public transport. There is no pre-school provision for under-fives, and shopping facilities are bad. The developments that have sprung up around Gloucester have been bolted on to the edge of our city and are developer-led. We should be building communities, not simply houses.

Gloucester has learnt some sharp lessons from the new developments. The Government should provide a lead, centrally and at county level, and address the housing puzzle with more vision. The previous Government left us in a mess. We are now looking to the new Labour Government not simply to puzzle out where to put new houses, but to have a long-term strategic vision of where future communities should be.

It is often convenient for rural areas to avoid any development by shunting developments on to the urban fringes, but that is storing up problems for the future. I understand that those living in beautiful rural areas do not want large developments, but nor do we want to take what often seems to be the easy option—shoving new developments on to the edges of cities without any real consideration for the needs of the communities.

More than half Gloucestershire comprises areas of outstanding natural beauty or green belt land. It would be very difficult for Gloucester to absorb many more new developments by bolting them on to the edges of our cities without longer-term vision and a strategic approach to developing communities.

There are difficulties, because we have to rely on private developers. We know what we want in our cities—it has already been mentioned by Opposition Members. We want to develop inner-city areas—flats above shops, small low-cost housing units for single people and elderly people. We want some of the run-down areas in the city

[Ms Tess Kingham]

to be redeveloped. However, we have to rely on private developers. When they can choose between regenerating an inner-city area with derelict streets or building profitable estates bolted on to the outskirts of cities, we all know which option they will take. We want development in Gloucester to be from the inside out, not bolted on the outskirts of the city.

We are looking to the new Labour Government to take a firm lead, as I am sure they will, in clearing up the mess that we were left by the previous Administration. We want an approach that goes beyond physical planning, reliance on private developers and current planning arrangements. We need a joint strategy to encompass housing, employment needs and transport to create large self-sustaining communities and a regional policy that meets that vision.

I want to be able to reassure local communities in Gloucester that it is not simply a puzzle of where to put 40,000 to 50,000 new house and shunting them between rural and urban areas. Therefore, I am asking the Government to reassure the people in my constituency that there is a long-term vision of building communities that takes us into the new millennium considering all the elements that a new community needs, including employment, community facilities and giving local authorities the power and encouragement to deal with private developers and look at the real needs of the communities that they serve.

11.33 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) for initiating today's debate on an issue that affects rural constituencies and suburban ones such as mine.

The hon. Member for Stroud has already explained why there will be an increase in the number of households. That there will be is indisputable, but there is doubt about the number of homes that might be required. A figure of 4.4 million has been mentioned, but it is possible to reach another figure—some 500,000—and I shall explain how.

The 4.4 million figure was projected in 1991. Since then, up to 1 million homes may already have been built, so we may be talking about a requirement of an additional 3.4 million. The figures assume inward migration. Historically, there have been periods when there has been no inward migration, so it is possible that 500,000 fewer dwellings may be needed. Assumptions have been made about the increase in the number of single households. If half the built-in increase actually occurs, a further 600,000 homes may be knocked off the estimate. Finally, there are 800,000 empty homes, so that figure can be taken off the list.

If we subtract all those figures from the original 4.4 million, we are left with 500,000. My calculation illustrates the wide range of figures that could be used, and the discrepancy makes it extremely important that the Government re-examine the figures.

The figures were produced in 1991 and the Government should not assume, six years later, that 4.4 million homes continue to be required and that new settlements and towns should be built throughout the country on the basis of figures that could be significantly out.

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): There may be a danger of wishful thinking getting in the way of facts. I appreciate that we are working on the previous Government's figures, but are not the projected housing figures reviewed every three years? Were not the present figures reviewed in 1995? Is it not also the case that they are based on Government statistics that were collected in 1992 and that the three most recent projections underestimated the growth in housing need? Is the hon. Gentleman not being a little unrealistic in hoping that we can reduce the figure simply be adjusting the mathematics?

Mr. Brake: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was saying only that there is some debate about the accuracy of the figure of 4.4 million. I am not suggesting that only 500,000 new houses are required; simply that there is a difference of view among experts about the figure. For that reason, the Government should consider a phased release of land rather than do everything in one go.

Mrs. Diana Organ (Forest of Dean): I agree that the figures are based on historic data that are merely projected forward. No clear methodology or model is employed in calculating the figures. As the Guinness advert says, 33 per cent. of all statistics are made up on the spot. One gets the feeling that the mechanical model of projecting from historic trends is not the way to discover our housing needs. The figures must be right, otherwise we will build on our green acres and all will be lost.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions must be brief and addressed to the Chair.

Mr. Brake: The Government should re-examine the projections, otherwise builders will embark unnecessarily on a massive building programme.

I should like to know whether demand can be reduced. The previous Government attempted to use social engineering with back to basics, but I am not suggesting that route. Demand cannot be reduced by social engineering, but something can be done about the 800,000 empty homes. The Government should support initiatives such as the above-shop scheme. In the past couple of days, my local council has set up an empty homes hotline that people can call if they have inherited a home that they are not using or are aware of a dwelling that has been empty for a number of years. Such schemes should be encouraged.

Can housing demand be influenced by the Government? Undoubtedly—even if they influence only inter-region migration. As the hon. Member for Stroud mentioned, the Government could increase employment and prosperity in certain areas, thereby reducing the need for migration. An integrated transport policy could help to ensure that currently inaccessible places are easier to reach, and make people want to remain there. The Government should examine also the reasons for inter-region migration.

If we accept that millions of homes are required, should we build them? We are back to the predict-and-provide question. Unlike roads—to which one can provide an alternative in the form of public transport—we cannot provide an alternative to a roof over someone's head; housing has to be provided.

If we provide housing, where should it be built? Brown-field and green-field sites have already been mentioned. The Government currently believe that

perhaps 50 per cent. of new housing can be built on brown-field sites and that the remaining 50 per cent. can be built in other locations. Other experts hold a different view—that possibly 60 per cent. of new housing can be built on brown-field sites and that 40 per cent. can be built in other areas. There is a good case for choosing and running with a target. Perhaps the Government should consider a 60 per cent. rather than a 50 per cent. construction target on brown-field sites.

Whether homes are built on brown-field or green-field sites, there will be some common requirements, some of which the hon. Member for Gloucester (Ms Kingham) outlined. Matters that require consideration include transport, health provision, education, social services, water resources and a host of other issues that will have to be considered at the time.

In my constituency, in the ward of Wandle valley, there has been massive private residential development. The only problem is that general practitioner services have not kept pace and many people now find it extremely difficult to get on to a GP's list. We must consider all the implications before we start a building programme on either brown-field or green-field sites.

It is environmentally preferable to build on brown-field sites. As technological advances are made, it will be easier, and I hope cheaper, to decontaminate sites. In my constituency, a BP chemical plant is being redeveloped as a model housing estate, with which we are very pleased. Moreover, commercial advances will make decontamination easier. Recently, an organisation with which some hon. Members may be familiar launched a commercial insurance scheme under which it provides land certification and developers with cover for potential risks associated with decontamination work.

Such developments will make it easier to develop brown-field sites, but we must ensure that jobs follow those developments. There is no point building homes on brown-field—or even on green-field—sites if there are no jobs. Furthermore, development will have to go hand in hand with regeneration of town centres. As hon. Members have said in this debate, brown-field site developments can help us to regenerate inner cities and other urban areas.

There is undoubtedly insufficient brown-field land. We must therefore consider building on other land—on what I have described as taupe-field land. For hon. Members who do not know it, taupe is a mixture of brown and grey. Taupe-field sites are those on which there is already some development, such as a road or a retail or industrial park. If we run out of brown-field land, perhaps we should consider either taupe-field sites or land on which there has been limited development, such as Ministry of Defence land.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): It is probable that all hon. Members in the Chamber favour greater development on brown-field land. The problem is that much of it is contaminated. Does the hon. Gentleman have any idea how we might decontaminate brown-field land and therefore be able to build on more of it?

Mr. Brake: In my constituency, BP has very successfully decontaminated land by removing topsoil and cleaning the environment. Decontamination has already happened. I do not think that there are any problems with decontaminating some land.

As a last resort, green-field sites will undoubtedly have to be used. Organisations that one would never have expected to support such development are already saying, "Yes, it will have to happen, because a limited amount of land is available for development."

I should like Ministers, first, to review the housing projections. They must be reviewed, regardless of whether they are made on a three-yearly basis. Secondly, the Government should also back an empty homes campaign, spearheaded by all local authorities. Finally, if development happens, as it must, it should happen—in descending order—on brown-field, taupe-field and green-field land.

11.45 am

Mr. Michael Wills (North Swindon): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in a debate on a matter that is of such great concern to my constituents in North Swindon. I know that our concerns are shared by my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown). I too should like to add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on initiating this important debate. As he rightly said, the housing need projection could change the face of the country and transform the way in which we live. I therefore agree with him and with other hon. Members who have spoken that that figure requires greater scrutiny.

Some housing increase is clearly required. The Government must also tackle the legacy of homelessness that they have inherited from the previous Government—an objective on which they have made a heartening start. Equally, new housing may have to be provided because of changing living patterns. The sheer scale of the numbers, however, is causing concern. It is projected that, by 2016, more than 5,000 new homes will be required in every constituency in the country, with all the consequent pressures on the local environment and infrastructure.

In Swindon, pressure on our green-field sites is already intense, and our share of the projected numbers could turn an already intolerable situation into an impossible one. I am sure that we are not alone, because numbers on such a scale amount to a revolution. I hope that no hon. Member would embark on a revolution without the most rigorous analysis of all the issues.

Much of the national debate—although not in the Chamber today, I am pleased to note—has focused on where new housing should be built and on the correct balance between green-field and brown-field sites. Although that is a vital issue, I should like to focus today on what, logically, is a prior issue. How certain can we be that we really need to make provision for quite so many homes? The answer must be: not very.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud and other hon. Members have said, the numbers have been reached by trend-based projections, which are extrapolations based on past behaviour. The evidence is that that technique has not proved wholly reliable. Between 1981 and 1992, for example, projections for annual household formation between 1991 and 1996 varied by almost 100 per cent.

Will such reliability really provide the basis for paving over our fields? I hope not. I suggest that public policy should never be too narrowly based on projections derived from highly complex sets of assumptions about human behaviour in 20 years' time. Will such projections really

[Mr. Michael Wills]

provide the only justification for concreting over our green spaces? Again, I hope not. I fear, however, that that is precisely what we will do if we allow the figure of 4.4 million new homes required by 2016 to be the driver of our housing policy.

As my hon. Friends and Opposition Members have pointed out, the figure is based on assumptions about social trends, which could easily turn out to be wrong in a society that is increasingly characterised by rapid change. Even relatively limited areas in the assumptions could have significant consequences for the figures.

In a study published in August, the city firm Credit Lyonnais Laing estimates that more than 1 million homes could be removed from the projection total if different, but realistic, assumptions are made about the growth in single unmarried households and a return to nil migration. All the experience of government in recent years tells us that, the more complex the calculations, the more likely they are to be wrong. These calculations are very complex. The more the Government depend on such calculations, the more likely they are to make mistakes.

Of course a start must be made somewhere. It would be wrong of me to cast aspersions on the validity of the methodology; that is not the point. The point is that government is an iterative process. It has to respond to the way in which complex forces interact with each other. We must not let a mathematical formula alone transform our landscape and our environment.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The hon. Gentleman, my parliamentary neighbour, is making a very cogent case for looking very carefully at projections. Does he agree that, if we over-provide, such over-provision—for any of the statistical reasons that he has enunciated—could become self-fulfilling?

Mr. Wills: Yes, I agree. That is one of the reasons why I am so worried about the apparent reliance on the figure.

It is clear from all the speeches in this debate that policies to implement the current figures will have a dramatic impact on this country. Surely there should be a more fully informed public debate on whether the people want their lives to be transformed in such a way.

Why cannot the Government produce a spread of scenarios based on realistic variations of key statistical factors, showing the impact of each scenario on the projected housing need and the resulting implications for the environment? With such a range of scenarios, we would be in a position to start making democratic decisions about whether we want to try to influence the key factors driving housing demand to produce a different outcome from the one we currently foresee. We are not helpless; there are all sorts of options. We have heard several in this debate—not least, encouraging the more efficient use of housing stock.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Whether we can make better use of housing stock is a very important issue. The need for 33 per cent. of the 4.4 million homes is due to a change in behaviour, which would suggest that we could make greater use of conversion. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be looking at the tax structure? There is a huge disincentive to convert homes because value added tax has to be paid—whereas it does not on new homes. Does he agree that the Government should be considering that?

Mr. Wills: I certainly agree. That is precisely the sort of measure that we need to factor into the figures to produce different scenarios for consideration by the people.

The Government have already signalled that they are prepared to make judgments and hard choices about the way in which people live for economic, social and health reasons. Should not we also be prepared to consider such action for environmental ones too? The election of the Government on 1 May revealed that people wanted to take their future back into their own hands. Now is the time for the Government to help them to do so over one of the most important issues facing the country. If we get this wrong, our children and our children's children will pay the price for generations.

A poet summed up the risk far better than I can—a man who contemplated Britain from his library in the town now represented in such a distinguished manner by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Philip Larkin wrote:

"I thought it would last my time
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms.
For the first time I feel somehow
That it isn't going to last
That before I snuff it, the whole
Boiling will be bricked in
Except for the tourist parts
And that will be England gone:
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There'll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres."

I urge the Government to heed his warning and look again at the figures.

11.54 am

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I welcome the opportunity to contribute briefly to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on securing a debate on this very important subject. He made a detailed speech about the statistics and analysis underlying the housing requirement. I do not propose to go too far down that route.

The hon. Member for Stroud will know that the previous Government received expert advice that there would be a growth in the number of households from 19.2 million to 23.6 million between 1991 and 2016. The hon. Members for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) and for North Swindon (Mr. Wills) cast some doubts on the statistics. It will be important for the Minister in his winding-up speech to say whether he agrees with the projection.

The figure is, of course, only a projection, which can always be revised. If it is revised downwards, we would all be pleased. None the less, the projection was

made on the basis of expert advice, so it is incumbent on the Minister to say clearly whether he accepts it or questions it in the way his Back Benchers have.

The previous Government received the expert advice from very good sources. I say to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington that that advice was considered by the then Select Committee on the Environment, which did not question the projection. In fact, it said that there was a consensus among experts that the figure might be an underestimate.

When the Government receive such expert advice, they have to be responsible, act on it, and be open. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) for his openness. He acted on the best advice available. For him, the question was not so much how many, but where. He set about planning in the most sustainable and environmentally friendly way. As the last Secretary of State for the Environment, he was a great friend of the environment. My speech will concentrate on the environment.

In meeting the housing requirement, it is vital that the planning system responds to the challenge and, if at all possible, steers development away from the green belt. I am very troubled, as a Member representing Hertfordshire, by the way in which the county and some borough authorities have responded to the planning process. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said, Hertfordshire county council has allocated for development 1,000 acres of green belt between Hemel Hempstead and Stevenage. That is of great concern throughout Hertfordshire. As the House will know, the green belt in Hertfordshire and the south-east generally is an extremely sensitive issue.

Ms Drown: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is an incentive to build on green-field sites, since the cost of them—if one can get hold of them—is often much less than that of brown-field sites? Did the previous Government ever think about doing something about that?

Mr. Clappison: As the House has already heard, the previous Government signalled to developers that they should try to avoid green belt sites. The House has also heard how very difficult it was to get permission for green belt sites from the previous Government. Indeed, the Opposition are a little troubled that the present Government have already given permission for a significant green belt development in Birmingham.

I return to the issue of Hertfordshire, which is important to me as a Member representing the county. I am concerned about not only the county development but the borough development in my constituency. My local authority first responded to its requirement of 4,600 new homes by issuing a draft local plan that identified three green belt sites. One was a particularly sensitive part of my constituency in Borehamwood—land known as Woodcock Hill north of Barnet lane in Borehamwood—where there are very strong green belt reasons for not allowing development to take place.

There was a significant campaign against development on the site in my constituency. I pay tribute to the Elstree and Borehamwood Green Belt Society and the Woodcock Hill Open Spaces Forever—WHOSE—campaign. They have persuaded the local authority to think again and, in the latest version of the draft local plan, part of the site has been removed—although I regret that part of it is still to be built on.

Unhappily, my local authority is now planning to build on another six green belt sites—building into the open countryside in some cases—against strong green belt considerations, in places such as Cherry Tree lane in Potters Bar and Watford road in Radlett, affecting the village character of Radlett and the green open spaces around Potters Bar. We value our green open spaces in Hertsmere. As hon. Members who have travelled through the area know, it contains the first green spaces on routes out of London.

The issues that I have raised are the responsibility of the local planning authority. Like many others, I have made my representations to it. I want the Government to give a strong signal to the planners, who are deciding how the housing requirement will be met. It is incumbent on the Government to send a clear signal that the green belt needs very strong protection.

I should like a strong restatement from the Minister of the importance of the green belt. One or two recent Government statements, made under the pressure of debate or radio interviews, have not put as strong an emphasis on green belt protection as they might have done. We know that appearing on the "Today" programme can put one under pressure. However, the Minister said in an interview on that programme that the green belt was

"up for grabs in the sense that it is always up for grabs. There are planning guidances to say that you can build on green belt in certain circumstances."

The Minister was a little modest in stating the protection that Government policy affords the green belt. Under the previous Government, green belt policy was embodied in planning policy guidance 2, which says not simply that the green belt can be built on in certain circumstances, but:

"There is a presumption against inappropriate development in the green belt unless very special circumstances exist which outweigh the harm caused by the development. Proposals in draft plans that would result in releasing land from the green belt must be fully justified. The Government are committed to protecting the green belt and encourage the recycling of land in urban areas wherever possible to meet development needs."

We need a robust re-statement from the Minister of the importance of the green belt.

We also need a commitment from the Government to consider the targets for brown-field development. We have heard about the targets set by the previous Government. In 1995 we set a target of half of all new development taking place on brown-field land. We thought that that needed to be looked at again and revised upwards. We were considering moving up to 60 per cent. The Minister knows that we received good advice from the Council for the Protection of Rural England and from the Round Table on Sustainable Development that as much as 75 per cent. could be achieved.

I ask the new Government to consider that expert advice carefully, particularly that from the round table, which was promoted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal under the previous Government as a source of good, independent, impartial advice to the Government. If any Government ever needed such impartial advice rather than cheerleading, the present Government do. They should consider that advice, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable, as it was for the previous Government.

[Mr. Clappison]

I ask the Minister to look carefully at the targets. I know that it may be a little early for a definite reply, but he should give us some indication that he is giving the ideas a fair wind. The green belt is of fundamental importance to my constituency, as it is to the rest of the country, particularly the south-east.

12.2 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The debate has been a partial re-run of the debate initiated by the Conservatives last week to express concern on behalf of our constituents. In that debate, as today, the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) questioned the figures for household projections. He was joined in that today by the hon. Member for North Swindon (Mr. Wills). They are both issuing a serious challenge to their Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) asked whether the Government accepted the projected figures. That was answered in last week's debate by the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), who said:

"We do not dispute the figures."—[*Official Report*, 4 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 211.]

Extraordinarily, there seems to be an orchestrated campaign by some Labour Members to undermine those figures. Perhaps the Minister will take a different line from that taken by his Under-Secretary last week.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere issued a plea on behalf of the green belt. Today we have the advantage that the Minister against whom the charges on the green belt are being made will come to the Dispatch Box to answer the debate. I shall not detain the House too long, because we are eager to hear what he has to say about the green belt, and his answer to the charge that he has been playing fast and loose with it.

Our suspicions were increased in last week's debate, because our motion included a charge against the Government of weakening planning controls designed to protect the green belt. That point was not answered in the Government amendment or in the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere has said, the Minister's words on the "Today" programme on 30 October have caused considerable suspicion. During that interview he repeatedly and pointedly failed to confirm the strong presumption against building on the green belt, which was the cornerstone of policy under the Conservative Government, who doubled the amount of green belt and dramatically increased its protection.

Recent Government actions have also given rise to concern. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions decided arbitrarily to overturn the recommendation of his independent inspector following a public inquiry on the development of 140 acres of green belt land in Birmingham, near Sutton Coldfield.

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): That is not for housing.

Mr. Chope: Under the Conservative Government, the green belt was sacrosanct, both in respect of housing and in respect of industrial use. It is amazing that the Minister is suggesting that the green belt is not safe against development for industrial purposes, particularly if an inspector has followed the plan-led system put in place by the Conservatives.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre) *rose—*

Mr. Chope: I am not going to give way, because I hope that the Minister will have a chance to respond to the debate and will take some interventions from Conservative Members, if, as we fear, his responses are not satisfactory.

We are told that the Government are considering the 700 responses to the Green Paper, "Where shall we live?". Perhaps it would have been better titled, "Where will you live?", because most of us know where we wish to live, and we choose to live where we want to live. Some of the comments from Labour Members have shown that there is a danger of telling people what to do. I have chosen to live in the countryside, in a semi-rural area. I do not wish to deprive other people of the chance to do that, but I recognise that we should be concerned about the destruction of the existing environment.

One of the concerns in East Dorset at the moment is that the Government's response to the East Dorset draft plan said that the proposed densities were not high enough. Coupled with the rather vague definition of brown land, that means that people who live in houses with gardens are threatened by substantial infill development that would dramatically alter the character of those areas and would, ironically, increase the pressure for more people to live in the countryside.

I hope that the Minister will tell us when the Government will produce some conclusions and stop the general chit-chat on the issue. The time for action is now.

12.8 pm

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): I wish to thank most of the hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, because it has been very constructive. I shall set out the base line for the debate—the Conservatives' best record, in 18 years, for building on brown-field sites was 40 per cent. Miraculously, within six months of leaving office, they have improved that to 75 per cent. That is definitely gilding the lily.

Mr. McWalter: Will my hon. Friend note that the previous junior Minister at the Department of the Environment, who lost Hemel Hempstead—the area that I now represent—at the election, is now employed by a construction company? Will he also note that intensive research to try to identify brown-field sites in Hertfordshire has proved unavailing?

Mr. Caborn: My hon. Friend's comments have been noted by the House and will appear in *Hansard*.

I first wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on initiating the debate today. As has been mentioned, it was covered in part in the Opposition day debate on rural life.

The housing problem is a major issue facing society today. I would love to come to the Dispatch Box and say that no new houses need to be built, but that is not the

reality. It is not the Government who are changing social patterns—that is happening out there in the real world. The Government have to accept that and respond to it. Many opportunities will arise from the growth in the number of households, and some have been mentioned this morning. Mixed development is an exciting prospect, and I have visited imaginative mixed development schemes in Liverpool and Manchester. The Government will encourage those.

I hope that the White Paper will be supportive of regional development agencies and will address the need to improve economic growth and tackle underperformance in the English regions. I hope that it will also suggest ways to relieve those areas in which economic development is overheating and to bring areas that are under-utilised closer to the average. I hope that the Government will be positive and constructive in the White Paper and the Bill that will be introduced later in the year.

I also hope that hon. Members will contribute to the White Paper on an integrated transport system, which will be important for the environment and for the issues that we are discussing today. While we accept that the market has a role to play in housing, we believe that the Government also have a role to play. Unfortunately, the previous Administration abdicated many of their responsibilities.

The main concerns for my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud are whether we believe the household projections and, more particularly, whether we need to plan for the number of households that they suggest will be formed. He has also, rightly, raised the special concerns of his constituency, where the projections require decisions to identify how and where housing should be provided, not just how much. I will try to address each of those issues in turn.

It will be useful for the House—because there seems to be some misunderstanding—if I explain what the household projections are, how they are arrived at, what they say, and how they are translated into development plans. In many areas of government, we do not have the luxury of looking a long way into the future and trying to plan for the changes that we expect will happen. The household projections do just that. They enable local authorities to estimate in their development plans the additional housing that they should provide in the next 10 years or so.

The first stage in the process involves assessing the population of the country using the census and the regular sub-national population projections, which are updated every two to three years. Migration trends, which have been mentioned by several hon. Members, are taken into account in that assessment, and local authorities are consulted about the accuracy of the trends. The evaluation is a rolling programme that is updated every three to four years. The result is a demographic picture of the country for up to 25 years into the future.

The second stage involves turning the population projections into household projections. That is done by dividing the population into five types of household, and projecting the trends in their formation rates into the future. Figures are available for every county and metropolitan area in the country.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I hope that the Minister will recognise that the problem is not with the overall methodology but with the application of the methodology to specific areas, especially rural counties such as Gloucestershire—which the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) mentioned—and my local county of Somerset. We cannot sustain the projected migration levels without employment. We cannot sustain the use of brown-field sites when they do not exist in our rural counties, but building on green-field sites would change our counties' character completely.

Mr. Caborn: I hope to clear that point up later in my speech.

Finally, local authorities meet at regional planning conferences and, using the household projections as their starting point, try to assess how the growth patterns in their region can best be managed. We will examine that issue carefully in the next year, and we will consult about how to strengthen regional planning. We are committed to the plan-led system, although we believe that it needs modernising. Regional areas need strengthening, as the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) suggested when he mentioned economic development in the regions.

Mr. Dawson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government were bequeathed a centralised planning system, in which local people had little opportunity to participate in the fundamental decision making at regional and county structure level? As part of his welcome proposals for reviewing regional planning operations and the possible introduction of regional development agencies, will he consider ways in which local people can have the first instead of the last say in the crucial housing needs and the environmental capacity of the areas that they know so well?

Mr. Caborn: That is an excellent intervention, and we will consider those issues when we consult on the modernisation of the plan-led system. *[Interruption.]* I say that genuinely, although the hon. Member for Christchurch is sniggering. The Conservatives never offered the people proper consultation. During their 18 years in office, people had to take it or leave it. We do not behave like that. We genuinely consult people and take their point of view into account. I may also say that I will probably take up the offer by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, and launch the consultation on the plan-led system in his constituency.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister accept that every planning policy guidance note was subject to the most thorough consultation process before it was implemented?

Mr. Caborn: My comments about consultation were in a wider context. The plan-led system exists, and planning guidance will continue to be subjected to consultation among those whom it will affect.

The regional planning conferences decide how much new growth their urban areas can take and broadly how much should go on brown-field sites and how much on green-field sites. If the Secretary of State is happy with their decisions, the advice is formally turned into regional planning guidance by the Government office. Following that, counties and local authorities use the regional planning guidance as the basis for preparing their plans.

[Mr. Caborn]

At each stage, the projections are again tested and distributed by the authorities. So where all the housing goes eventually—green-field or brown-field sites—is decided by the local authorities. It must be stressed that that is where the decision is taken.

It is unfortunate that the debate still seems to be stuck on the question whether we believe the projections, or whether we need to meet demand. That ground has been examined in detail on numerous occasions, especially in the previous Administration's Green Paper "Household Growth—Where shall we live?", which has been mentioned already today. That document stated in no uncertain terms that large-scale household growth was a fact driven by social, demographic, and cultural changes and that we should address how we can manage the problems, or grasp the opportunities that the growth presents, rather than focusing on "not in my back yard" attitudes.

Mrs. Organ: I understand the principle of using the projection model, but I am concerned about the lack of academic investigation of the social drivers. Where does what is happening in society come into the numbers and the model?

Mr. Caborn: That is factored in in a number of ways. I cannot go into the detail now, but it is in the household projections to the year 2016.

I was about to say that, since the 1920s, every projection for household growth has been an underestimate. Moreover, in 1995 the Environment Committee's inquiry into housing need went through the entire methodology of the way in which such figures are arrived at. It is not for me, from the Dispatch Box, to direct, but all I can suggest is that, if Select Committees wishes to revisit that methodology and the rest of what the Select Committee did in 1995, it is open to it to do so.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) *rose—*

Mr. Caborn: I cannot give way again. Time is moving on.

Many people still criticise the system, but no one produces viable alternatives. With all due respect, it was a bit of a back-of-the-fag packet calculation by which the figure was brought down this morning from 4.4 million to half a million.

Those who suggest that local authorities should not make adequate provision for projected housing demand often seem to ignore the consequences. People must realise that serious under-provision would mean house price inflation, as demand bids up prices—and the average price of residential development land in England is already £250,000 per acre.

That would mean an increase in the Government's social housing bill, because more people would be unable to afford their own homes, and because land prices would continue to rise. It would even mean an increase in homelessness as some people were forced out of the system altogether, and, with fewer homes to go round, an increase in sharing would become a reality, so many people could be forced into living together against their wishes. Those factors must be considered.

I should make clear the fact that the target for reusing previously developed land remains at 50 per cent., the same as the previous Government's official target. Although the Green Paper floated a figure of 60 per cent. as an aspirational target, and the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development even suggested 75 per cent., we have not changed the target. The key issue, however, is that, whatever recycling target is proposed, by whatever Government, a certain proportion of growth will still need to take place on green-field sites.

Mr. Clappison: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Caborn: For the last time.

Mr. Clappison: Am I to take it that the Minister is not listening to the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, and is ignoring the consultation and the figure that it gave? He will know that the target of 50 per cent. is only slightly higher than the 47 per cent. that was achieved in 1992. Will he think carefully about giving a lead for urban regeneration and brown-field development by setting a target?

Mr. Caborn: I can set targets, but if targets are not realistic, it is stupid for Governments to set them. I have set a target of 50 per cent. and if we can achieve that, and more, I should welcome the fact. If we could get 100 per cent. of development on brown-field sites, I would welcome that—but all the evidence from the previous Administration, as well as our present advice, suggests that it is not achievable.

What I have said so far is very general. What does it mean for local areas, for local people in Stroud and the rest of Gloucestershire? As my hon. Friend will know from his time as a Stroud district councillor, Gloucestershire county council is reviewing its structure plan. In that process, it has to take as its starting point the housing requirement figure agreed and published in the regional planning guidance for the south-west. That figure is 53,000 additional dwellings between 1991 and 2011. It was based on the previous set of household projections, not those issued in 1995, which provide the basis for the 4.4 million additional households.

The consultation draft Gloucestershire structure plan was published in May 1996. It accepted the regional planning guidance figure of 53,000, and allocated 8,900 additional dwellings to Stroud for the period 1991 to 2011.

Mr. Laurence Robertson *rose—*

Mr. Caborn: No, I cannot give way, because if I do I shall not be able to get through my speech, and hon. Members have already asked me to answer some of the questions.

Mr. Chope: Will the Minister get to the green belt?

Mr. Caborn: I shall deal with that, too.

Following its consideration of the responses to the draft plan, Gloucestershire county council does not intend to proceed further with it. I understand that it is now in the process of preparing a new plan, which it intends to place on deposit for public consultation on 12 January. That

plan will be subject to scrutiny at an examination in public, which the council intends to hold next June. That will give everyone concerned about its content an opportunity to question the county's proposals.

Stroud district published a local plan consultation document last July, which accepted the housing requirements in the draft structure plan. After taking account of houses built since 1991, existing allocations and an allowance for windfall sites, the council identifies a need to find land for a further 3,800 new dwellings between now and 2011.

The consultation draft considers ways in which the requirement could be met, and identifies 12 potential housing sites. I understand that the largest of those, covering about 200 acres in an area of outstanding natural beauty to the north of Stroud, in the Painswick valley, has been very controversial locally. My officials in the Government office for the south-west have commented that the consultation paper did not consider how the proposed development in the Painswick valley could be reconciled with the objectives of designating areas of outstanding natural beauty; nor did it provide any local justification that might override the national importance of the designation.

I understand that the district council intends to publish a deposit version of the plan next summer, so my hon. Friend and his constituents will have a further opportunity to make their views known. The district council will have an opportunity to reconsider its proposals, and if it does not, objectors have the right to debate the issue before an inspector at the local plan inquiry. That is a good illustration of the process of checks and balances.

The household projections feed into the consideration of housing requirements in regional planning guidance, which, after debate at the regional level, allocates housing requirement figures to the counties. The counties then propose how much housing should be provided for in their areas by district, and that is tested at the examination in public into the structure plans. The structure plan figures are then further tested in the course of producing the district-wide local plans through public consultation, and ultimately at the local plan inquiry. That also shows that it is for local authorities to determine how and where new housing should go.

The new housing creates both problems and opportunities. District councils cannot simply decide which field should be developed next, or what sites can be found for redevelopment. The need to look ahead to 2011 ensures that they must address the question of what will prove the most suitable and sustainable pattern of development. The choices must be local, unless there is direct conflict with national policy. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud would agree that is how things should be.

I now come to the question that the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) asked about urbanisation. The urbanisation projections should be put into perspective. The most recent projections suggest that the additional housing from 1991 to 2016 would mean only about an extra 1.3 per cent. of the whole of England being urbanised by 2016, bringing urbanisation to a total of 11.9 per cent. It is on that 11.9 per cent. that 88 per cent. of the population would live. That hardly sounds like the concreting over of the countryside that some Members would have us believe is taking place. There would still be as much green belt as urban land.

There is growing concern about the green belt, but let me put that into perspective. The green belt has doubled in area over the past 20 years, whereas the amount of land in urban use has increased by just over 10 per cent. in the same period.

Four times as much land has been added to the green belt over the past 20 years as we expect to urbanise over the next 20 years. The policy on green belts, however, has not changed. It is in PPG2: there is a presumption against inappropriate development in green belts. However, local authorities have always been able to make changes to the boundaries of green belts through the development plan process. That allows for public participation. If local people consider that the most suitable approach, we must think carefully before intervening.

Overall, we have very tight controls on development in this country, with 35 per cent. of our land area designated, as areas of outstanding natural beauty, national parks, sites of special scientific interest or other special protection areas. In addition, more than 15 per cent. of land is protected as high-grade agricultural land. The countryside, we believe, is not unprotected.

The household projections are at present the only logical starting point for calculating the housing requirements in regional planning guidance and subsequently in development plans. However, they are only projections, incorporating our best understanding of recent social and demographic trends, including migration. They operate on a rolling basis, and can be challenged by local people before they are put into practice.

Traffic Lights (Left Turns)

12.30 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Turning right on red with caution is a practice that has been successfully adopted in the United States for about 15 years; so successfully that its application has spread from state to state, and, I believe, now applies in every state in the Union. That is in a country that has the best traffic accident record in the world.

Allowing right turns on red in the United States has greatly increased traffic flows, not least for road-based public transport. Why not try it here, in the form of a "turning left on red with caution" policy? As in the United States, the responsibility for making the manoeuvre safely would rest with the driver, who would often face an identical situation to the one in which he has to turn left at a T-junction with no lights. I see no reason why the British motorist should be less able to cope than his American or Canadian counterpart, or, for that matter, the driver in New Zealand, where the introduction of the practice is being considered.

The practice would not be universal, as there would be intersections at which it would be inappropriate; those would be clearly marked, as they are in the United States. Traffic at certain times of the day, in some of our big towns and cities, has reached near-crisis proportions; there are times when it comes to a complete standstill. That hits public road transport especially hard.

A recent survey by the Department of Transport in central London showed that, in 1996, an average journey of 1.7 miles took 18 minutes by bicycle, but 38 minutes by bus—more than twice as long. The time spent on the bus had increased by three minutes since 1993. I know that bicycling to work is considered green and therefore the height of fashion, but bicycling in big cities, with all its attendant safety risks, as against using public road transport, cannot sensibly be the Government's preferred option—unless they want our cities to become like Chinese cities.

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): In his interesting dissertation on traffic conditions in cities, my hon. Friend may care to consider the propensity, indeed the habitual practice, of some cyclists of using the pavement, which is the proper precinct for pedestrians.

Sir Michael Spicer: That is an interesting thought.

One of the objectives of transport policy, even though it may not be totally fashionable with the Government at the moment, must be to speed up traffic flows. My suggestion is modest, and cannot compare in importance to measures that might be introduced for road pricing, for instance. Because it works elsewhere, turning left on red merits the Minister's attention. I ask her not for a definitive answer, but to agree to a study, preferably by the Road Transport Laboratory at Crowthorne, and to report back to the House on it.

There are clearly problems with the idea, especially where pedestrians are concerned, but they have not proved insurmountable in America, which has higher road safety standards than any comparable country. In this context, America includes Canada, with the exception of Quebec. It cannot be right for the present congestion, especially in our cities and towns, to continue. The clogging of inner-city roads has reached the point at which it is bad for safety, bad for health and bad for the economy.

My suggestion is offered modestly and undogmatically. If, after studying the matter, the Minister does not like it, she will have to come up with something better—something that I sincerely trust will not involve a dictatorial ban on the private motorist.

12.36 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) on raising a particularly interesting question. Making the best use of the road network will be an important part of our integrated transport policy, but best does not necessarily mean maximising capacity for cars and lorries. We must take account of the needs of all road users, as well as our environmental and safety objectives.

Managing traffic at road junctions, which are often the main constraints and conflict points, especially in towns and cities, will be one of the key elements in any local transport strategy, and traffic signals are one of a range of tools available to do that. Each junction needs to be carefully considered; that is particularly important in areas where there is usually a wide range of competing demands from pedestrians, cyclists, motor cyclists, buses, taxis, vans, lorries and cars.

The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) talked about cycling on pavements. I am sure that the hon. Member for West Worcestershire is aware that such a practice is illegal unless local authorities have designated specific cycle routes on especially wide pavements.

My Department publishes advice on highway and junction design that includes the geometric design of junctions and the design of traffic signals and pedestrian crossings. Traffic signals are an effective means of helping to ration road space. As we try to do more, and particularly when local highway authorities are aiming to provide better facilities for pedestrians, signal control strategies and the equipment that goes with them will become more complex.

I speak only in general terms; what is right for an individual site will be a matter for the highway authority concerned, which will need to consider all the characteristics of the site and the traffic demands.

Authorities will increasingly consider how to meet the needs of pedestrians and cyclists, who do not always receive a good, or indeed fair, deal in the allocation of time or space at junctions and on the highway generally. Initiatives are under way to improve conditions for cycling and walking, both of which have a part to play in helping to reduce car dependency. I chair the national cycling forum and the walking steering group, both of which are addressing these issues.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): If the Minister's Department is to consider the possibility of cars turning left at traffic lights, could it also consider the possibility of cyclists doing the same?

Ms Jackson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I have as yet given no indication as

to the Government's response to the proposals made by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire. I shall come to that later.

My Department has promoted the use of new signalling systems, and continues to sponsor research to see how they can be developed to deal with increasingly complicated traffic movements. Green arrow signals are widely used to control the movement of separate traffic streams, and they work well. For example, they allow left and right turns to be signalled to go at different times. The more efficient use of junctions and can sometimes be the key to providing protected crossings for pedestrians.

Where junctions become very complex, a multitude of traffic signal heads may become confusing. We are working with local authorities to evaluate whether amber arrows may be helpful to drivers. At sites with a number of different green arrow signalled movements, some drivers may wrongly anticipate the next signal in the sequence. Amber arrow signals may help. If the trials prove promising, we could prepare advice on when and where their wider use would be appropriate.

It is often suggested that we should adopt the practice of allowing drivers to make left turns at red traffic signals if their exit is clear—a practice often used, as the hon. Member for West Worcestershire stated, in the United States of America, although there, as he said, it is right turn on red. I believe that it was Woody Allen who said that the sole cultural contribution made by the state of California to the United States of America was the privilege of turning right on a red light.

There are significant differences between traffic signal operation here and in the USA. There, traffic signals tend to operate in a fixed-time manner, which can lead to traffic waiting at signals when there is no conflicting traffic movement. The majority of traffic signals in the United Kingdom are vehicle-actuated, where the green period is varied automatically with the traffic flow. This reduces unnecessary delays and the need to introduce uncontrolled turns.

One effect of vehicle-actuated signals and relatively short signal stages is that traffic moves through junctions in blocks. These blocks crossing the junction would prevent left-turning traffic from moving until given a green light in any case, and there would be only a small improvement, at best, in the efficiency of the junction.

Opportunities to turn left are further limited when, as in much of the United Kingdom, road widths preclude separate left-turn lanes, and left-turn traffic has to wait behind that going straight on. Another factor is visibility for turning traffic. Regrettably, many junctions here have poor visibility because of existing buildings and the junction geometry.

Safety must be a key consideration, so positive signalling is used. Vehicles may not proceed without a green light. This is vital where pedestrians may be crossing. Pedestrian facilities are often provided at signal-controlled junctions, and may include audible and tactile indicators for use by people with visual disabilities. Pedestrians are not given a signal to cross unless a red signal has been given to all vehicles that could pass or turn through that crossing point. This protection for pedestrians would be compromised by allowing left-turning vehicles to pass a red signal.

The Government have a clear commitment to promote the independent mobility of disabled people, including those who are blind or partially sighted. One of the key aspects of independence is giving blind people the confidence to move with safety within the urban environment.

There is a long tradition in the United Kingdom of audible and tactile signals at road crossings which tell a blind person when it is safe to cross. This is possible only when all traffic has been signalled to stop. It is out of the question to consider a situation in which the message to a blind person would have to be, "It's probably okay to cross, but there might be traffic turning across you as you do."

It is worth noting that, in the USA, where a right turn on red is a long-established custom, the needs of blind people have not been given the priority that they have in this country. Studies in the mid-1970s, in six states where turning right on red was introduced, showed, despite the comment of the hon. Member for West Worcestershire, increases in accidents ranging from 20 per cent. to 110 per cent. Vulnerable pedestrians and cyclists' groups showed the greatest increase.

We have a system of traffic control in this country that works well. It is consistent, well understood and obeyed. It is as good as or better than that in use anywhere else, and we want to keep it that way.

Sir Michael Spicer: The Minister just said the system of traffic control worked well. By what criteria does she judge whether a traffic system works well? Clearly, if all the traffic has come to a stop in part of a big city, and part of that is caused by the traffic light system, it is not working well.

Ms Jackson: The hon. Gentleman is confusing two issues here. Traffic jams are not occasioned by poor signalling or a system of signalling. They are often caused because there are far too many cars on roads that were not built to accommodate them. That is why the Government intend to introduce an integrated transport strategy, whereby there will be alternatives to what is seen to be an over-dependence on the private car. I do not think that we would automatically reduce traffic jams by making major changes to signalling systems that meet the needs of a wide range of road users. As I say, the primary consideration must be safety.

Although we wish to make improvements to the efficiency and flexibility of traffic control, they must not be at the expense of safety, especially for the more vulnerable groups of road users. We should, of course, always be open to new ideas, and should look at what others do to see if we can learn from them, but it is important that we are careful to evaluate proposed changes to see that they do not compromise our objectives.

In the case of turning left through red traffic lights, we have looked at the proposal, but have concluded that the disbenefits to pedestrians, to blind and partially-sighted pedestrians especially, more than outweigh any gains that might be achieved for vehicles.

Sir Michael Spicer *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. The hon. Gentleman cannot address the House again.

Hatfield Peverel to Witham (Link Road)

12.46 pm

Mr. Alan Hurst (Braintree): I am grateful for the opportunity to address the House on this proposed road. Before I proceed, I should like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister on her appointment. I say that not out of sycophancy but because she was good enough to visit my constituency before 1 May and before it obtained most-favoured status.

I imagine that most hon. Members are familiar with the A12. It is the trunk road that runs from the Southend arterial A127 in south Essex north-east through Essex and thence to East Anglia. It is a major carrier of vehicles and has traditionally so been. It has obviously changed over the years. Elderly folk in my constituency are proud to show me photographs showing their grandparents playing in the street that was then the A12. If anyone did that now, they would not last more than 15 seconds.

The original A12 meandered through the towns and villages of Essex, in particular Hatfield Peverel, Witham and Kelvedon, which are on the section with which I am concerned. That was the position until the early 1960s, when improvements began to be made. Even at that time, the road was heavily congested. One can remember as a child being taken for outings to the east coast and being stuck in Hatfield Peverel, Witham or Kelvedon or one or another of the villages along the road.

From the 1960s onwards, dual carriageways were constructed. The section to which I have referred was affected by two bypasses in 1965. When the Hatfield Peverel and Witham dual carriageway bypasses were constructed, the volume of traffic per day was some 21,000 vehicles. The comparative figure for 1996 is 75,000 vehicles per day on that section—three and a half times greater than the volume of traffic for which the road was constructed some 30 years ago.

The problem is not merely one of volume. The approach to Hatfield Peverel on the A12 is singularly hazardous. Some time after 1965, the Chelmsford section running north-east towards Hatfield Peverel was constructed in three lanes, but the three-lane section ends just short of Hatfield Peverel and thereafter the road goes back to two lanes by way of a defile through the village and out the other side. All of us are aware of the hazards of a road changing from three lanes to two: vehicles bunch together and there is often high-speed and erratic crossing of lanes, and this certainly occurs on the A12 at that point. Indeed, the problem is aggravated by the fact that the vehicles accelerate: the approach to the two-lane section is downhill, thus increasing the speed of vehicles approaching Hatfield Peverel.

Once through Hatfield Peverel, the A12 is joined by a slip road out of the village itself. That slip road serves not only village residents, but those coming from Maldon and the Dengie peninsula to the east in order either to join the A12 or to pass on to Witham and Braintree. As the A12 approaches that slip road, it is coming up a hill and around a bend and the visibility of the entrance to the slip road is extremely obscured for vehicles travelling on the major trunk road, the A12.

Those brave enough to enter the A12 from the Hatfield Peverel slip road running north-east face a downhill short section with a low level of visibility to traffic coming from behind. Indeed, for the nervous or inexperienced motorist, it is a junction to be avoided. At busy times of day, it is almost impossible to enter the A12 from the Hatfield Peverel slip road because of the speed of traffic and the lack of visibility of oncoming vehicles.

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): I strongly endorse what the hon. Gentleman says. He is right to say that many of my Maldon constituents use the road to Hatfield Peverel to reach the A12, but is he aware that Maldon continues to grow, and that congestion at Danbury is forcing more people to reach the A12 via Hatfield Peverel? The problem which he describes is therefore likely to increase in coming years.

Mr. Hurst: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The population of the old Maldon division, which was formerly part of my constituency, has increased considerably over the past 30 years, and there are proposals that that growth should continue.

Over the past three years, there have been 50 personal injury accidents on the 2 km section of dual carriageway. That number includes five fatalities: it is a tragic coincidence that, today, an inquest is being held in the county town of Chelmsford into the most recent fatality, which occurred earlier this year. The statistic for the accident rate is 0.4 personal injury accidents per million vehicle kilometres; I am advised that that is 50 per cent. higher than the national A road rate, and more than three times the national rate for dual carriageways.

Essex county council, of which I am honoured to remain a member for a few months, has been concerned at the dangers presented by the A12 Hatfield Peverel to Witham section and has put at the top of its priority list the link road proposal to which I shall come shortly. I attended a meeting of the highways committee held earlier in the month, at which the proposal was placed in the priority category, above improvements to the M11 in west Essex.

I now turn to the point made by the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) about population growth. In the 1960s, Witham was designated to receive industrial development linked with population growth, predominantly from east London. Over 20 years, until the 1980s, its population increased greatly, and the growth continues to the present day, especially on the south side of the town. An additional development is planned for the south side: known as the Maltings Lane development, it will add a further 800 dwellings.

It is significant that a debate earlier this morning dealt with housing allocation, because the Essex structure plan would site a further 4,000 dwellings, over and above those already allocated, near the Witham-Hatfield Peverel-Kelvedon section of the A12. As the hon. Gentleman said, there is substantial growth in the Maldon area and in parts of Danbury and Chelmsford, which will lead to increased use of the intersections on to the A12.

Turning to local people's response, a consultation exercise was carried out by Essex county council on options and proposals for improvement by way of a link road. The exercise took a fairly wide form—in particular, an exhibition at Hatfield Peverel village hall in summer 1996 ran for some time and attracted many visitors who gave their preferences. The current favoured scheme is for

a road to run parallel on the north-east side of Hatfield Peverel to link up with the intersection at Witham. It will have limited or no environmental disadvantages and will ensure that all local traffic—not only from Hatfield Peverel, but from the Maldon, Dengie and Chelmsford areas—can be routed without entering the A12 at all. If local traffic is removed from the A12, that has obvious advantages, not only for local residents, but for those travelling on the A12 who are at risk from those seeking access to the A12 dual carriageway, whether carefully or otherwise.

The proposal is supported by the county council and by Hatfield Peverel parish council, Witham town council and Braintree district council. I should not be surprised to find that it is supported by district councils and parish councils in the constituency represented by the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford. I understand that the current anticipated cost of the limited scheme now favoured by the county council is between £2.2 million and £2.4 million. A cost-benefit analysis shows that 88 per cent. of the scheme benefits would accrue to the trunk road. I claim no great expertise in such calculations, but those who advise me say that that is a high rating.

In comparison with other road improvement schemes, the cost of the link is comparatively modest. I should be pleased if the Minister would give favourable consideration to the link being given high priority as a reasonable scheme. I am sure that that would give great benefit to residents of Hatfield Peverel, Witham and beyond.

12.58 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr. Hurst) on securing this debate and thank him for his generosity in affording the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) an intervention. Clearly, there is cross-party unity on many of the issues on which my hon. Friend touched. I also thank my hon. Friend for welcoming me to the Government Front Bench. I assure him that compliments in this place are so rare that there is never a danger of anyone being accused of sycophancy.

My hon. Friend has devoted a good deal of effort and time to drawing the attention of my noble Friend the Minister for Roads to the problems on the A12 and the spate of recent mortalities. I feel sure that the whole House offers its sympathy to my hon. Friend and its condolences to his constituents. My noble Friend was particularly saddened to read a letter from Nancy Mesher, one of my hon. Friend's constituents, who suffered the tragic loss of her mother and young brother in a road accident. In her letter, Nancy gave details of the terrible tragedy that robbed her of her mother and brother, and was particularly concerned about what seemed to her to be a lack of adequate signing which occasioned her personal tragedy.

My noble Friend was particularly moved by the fact that Nancy had put aside her personal tragedy and written to my noble Friend putting forward ideas which she hoped would ensure that no other family would have to go through the grievous experience that she had lived through. My noble Friend wrote to Nancy and was able to tell her that Essex county council had now completed improvements to the signing and road markings, which change the priority at the Duke of Wellington junction opposite the bridge over the A12 so that north bound drivers are guided more clearly to the through route. Other improvements have been made, such as a waiting restriction and cross-hatching on the County road, beyond the end of the slip road, to prevent vehicles from parking on the road and obscuring the signs that have also now been installed.

My noble Friend the Minister for Roads was so moved by the thought of Nancy writing to try to improve road safety when she must be still grieving for her own terrible loss that she immediately agreed to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree and a deputation of Essex county councillors to discuss the safety issues relating to that road. I believe that the meeting is to take place very soon.

I understand my hon. Friend's desire for an early decision on the scheme, but it may help the House if I put it into the context of the roads review and how that review fits into the overall thrust of the Government's transport policies. Our work to develop an integrated transport policy provides the immediate context for the roads review. The backdrop to that fundamental review is a candid recognition that we cannot carry on as at present. The predicted growth of traffic and the consequent congestion are unsustainable; the environmental, economic and social implications are simply unacceptable. The appropriate response, however, cannot be simply to hack away once again at the roads programme without taking any other action.

We need to take a much broader view, looking at all modes, using broadly based criteria to assess schemes. One of the encouraging aspects of that hugely ambitious task is the degree to which there is agreement that we need to change. We need to look at the role of the motor vehicle in providing mobility in a more integrated transport system, which makes the best use of the contribution that each mode can make, ensures that all options are considered on a basis that is fair and is seen to be fair, takes safety, environmental, economic, accessibility and integration considerations into account from the outset—and does so in a way in which we can all have confidence and which, above all, is sustainable.

That is the context for our roads review. It is an integral part of our integrated transport policy work. It is about the role that trunk roads should play alongside other modes in an integrated and sustainable transport policy.

An issue that looms largest in the roads review is congestion. On current predictions, if we do nothing, in 20 years' time there will be roughly half as much traffic again on our roads. We could allow increasing congestion to ration road space, but the costs to industry, the environment and society more generally would be unacceptable. That leaves us with three broad options: to make better use of the existing infrastructure; to manage demand; or to provide new infrastructure.

Making best use of the existing infrastructure is the obvious first choice. It has been provided at substantial cost, in both financial and environmental terms, and we must make the best use of that investment. Much work is going on, looking at old and new technologies, on local roads and on the motorway and trunk road network, to make better use of the network. A number of measures can also bring safety benefits, and we shall need to ensure that those are given proper priority, but we need to be

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

realistic about what the various options for making better use of the network can truly deliver. We must also look seriously at other harder options: managing demand and providing new infrastructure.

Managing demand is a vast topic which cuts across all modes. It encompasses reducing the need to travel through land use planning and by changing how we live, work and enjoy our leisure time. It must include an assessment of the extent to which a shift to other modes can be encouraged. Inevitably, it includes controlling demand by pricing or rationing mechanisms—unpopular though they may be.

It includes both carrots and sticks. It provides carrots in terms of providing attractive public transport alternatives; safe and unpolluted routes for walking and cycling; easy access to public transport and good interchanges between different public transport services. It provides sticks in terms of measures, such as parking restraints, that make car use less attractive. Many local authorities are seeking, through integrated transport packages, to combine measures in that way so that mobility is maintained but the adverse consequence of that mobility is reduced.

The Highways Agency's programme of small safety schemes is continuing and is not being put on hold pending the outcome of the roads review, but other new major construction is under review. Providing new infrastructure is a difficult option, both financially and in terms of its possible impact on the environment. In some cases, a new or widened road may turn out to be the only option, but our starting point is that we shall not proceed with major new trunk road infrastructure unless we are satisfied that there is no better alternative. Even then, difficult choices will have to be made within the limited resources available.

There is no substitute for rigorous case-by-case examination of the options. That is what we have set about in our consultation exercise. In addition, my noble Friend the Minister for Roads recently wrote to all Members of Parliament inviting them to meetings on a regional basis. Hon. Members will have an opportunity to comment on schemes and help Ministers assess the outcome of the consultation before we take any decisions.

I shall now deal with the specifics of my hon. Friend's case for a link road between Hatfield Peverel and Witham. The A12 trunk road links east London with Chelmsford, Colchester, Ipswich and the east coast ports of Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth. Traffic is very heavy towards London, with the section between Hatfield Peverel and Witham carrying more than 80,000 vehicles a day.

Although the A12 is dual carriageway between the M25 and Ipswich, the standard varies between dual two and dual three lanes. In 1990, there were nine schemes for bypasses or widening of the A12 in the national programme, one of which—Gorleston relief road—was constructed in 1993. The list included the A12 between Hatfield Peverel and Marks Tey. In the 1994 review, one scheme—Saxmundham bypass dualling—was withdrawn and others rationalised. In that review, all the schemes between the M25 and Ipswich were given priority two status, which means that they remained in the programme but priority one schemes had first call on available funds.

In November 1995, three schemes—a Blythburgh bypass, a Kessingland to Pleasurewood road and widening of the Chelmsford bypass—were withdrawn from the programme. The remaining six schemes were put into the longer-term programme, as they were judged to have lower national priority. Preparation work was suspended, to be resumed when the programme rolled forward. In November 1996, however, all the remaining schemes for improvement of the A12 were withdrawn.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing the Essex transport issues to the attention of the House. I am sure that he will appreciate that, until the roads review has been completed, I cannot tell him what priority the scheme that he advocates can expect to be given in a world of developing policy and increasingly heavy demands on the public purse, but I can guarantee close scrutiny.

Planning (Maidenhead)

1.9 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): I am grateful for the opportunity of this Adjournment debate to raise a number of planning issues that are of particular concern to my constituents in Maidenhead, but which will have an echo across the country, because they are general issues with which many hon. Members will have experienced problems in their constituencies. I hope that, as I am raising general issues, the Minister will respond positively.

Many of my constituents feel under siege from developers, especially developers who will not take no for an answer. The problem of multiple applications is very much alive in my constituency. There are two aspects to the problem, which I shall illustrate by quoting two examples.

The first is Badnell's tip in Maidenhead. It is a former waste tip site. Later, I shall speak about contaminated land. Badnell's tip has been the subject of a planning application for development. The residents opposed the application, the council turned it down, the matter went to public inquiry, the appeal was turned down, and now the process is starting again with another development application, which the residents continue to oppose and the council has refused. The public inquiry finished over the summer and we now await the inspector's decision.

My constituents ask why they should have to go through the process all over again. There is a cost to local residents in terms of their worry about what might happen to the site, there is a cost in overall terms to the town, because we do not know whether a potentially significant development will proceed, and there is a cost to the council tax payers as the council has to fight another public inquiry. The Badnell's tip public inquiry cost the local borough council about £70,000.

Residents are worried that, if they are constantly fighting development applications, eventually something will give and an application that might otherwise have been refused will be given permission.

The problem arises in a different way in another issue in my constituency—the development of motorway service areas. There are currently eight applications for the development of a motorway service area at junction 8/9 on the M4 or between junction 8/9 and junction 10. We have just had a public inquiry on three of those applications, and the others are at various stages of the planning process. They affect not only my constituency, but the constituencies of Windsor and Bracknell.

Once again, residents find that they must fight constantly to defend their local environment. They are particularly concerned because, when the planning inspector gave approval for the development of a motorway service area at Reading, which is the first MSA down the M4 from Heston, he said in his judgment that he did not consider that there was any need for a motorway service area between Reading and Heston, yet there are eight applications on the stocks for just such an MSA.

Constituents ask why the planning process can put them through all that anxiety and the battle to save their environment, when a decision from a planning inspector suggests that there may be no need for the development in that stretch of road.

I hope that the Government will examine the issue of multiple applications and look perhaps at the imposition of time limits and at the possibility that all applications for a given type of development such as an MSA are submitted within a given time and considered in one block, instead of the rolling process and the constant need to fight. I hope that the Government will consider the problem sympathetically and find a way of resolving it, as it does not affect my constituency alone.

I mentioned Badnell's tip and the issue of contaminated land. Badnell's tip was a waste tip in the times when people dumped waste without giving the matter much thought. A local builder tells the story of having been down to the site many years ago and seen some rather nice glass bottles. He did not know what was in them, but fortunately someone else at the site suggested that he should not take the bottles away, as they were full of cyanide. There is certainly cyanide and asbestos in the tip, but no one is quite sure what else is present on the Badnell's tip site. Local residents are, naturally, extremely concerned.

At present there is no problem. The site is open space and is undisturbed, but local people are worried about what might happen if development permission is given and the site is disturbed by a developer. The potential problems arising from the site are illustrated by the fact that when the inspector at the recent planning inquiry went to look at the site, he wore a gas mask—a precaution that I did not take when I visited the site recently with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), the shadow spokesman on planning and local government matters.

Will the Government examine the issue of contaminated land? In 1990, the Select Committee on the Environment proposed that local authorities should have a duty to compile registers of contaminated land. That was originally in the Environmental Protection Act 1990, but was repealed in the Environment Act 1995. I understand why the Government did that, but I question whether the decision was correct. I hope that the Government will consider instituting registers of contaminated land, and will review the powers of local authorities and the Environment Agency, to help with the clearing up of such sites.

Another relevant site in my constituency is Sandford farm in Woodley. I sometimes say that I am the Member of Parliament for tips—I will not say that I am the rubbish Member of Parliament, which would have an entirely different connotation. There has been a problem with the tip at Sandford farm. In the summer of 1996, the district council told local residents that they should not hold barbecues in their gardens because of the methane escaping from the site, which created the risk of explosions.

There is the question whether the local authority has the finance or the power to clean up that site, and what role the Environment Agency has in the matter. I ask the Minister to examine the issue. There is an application from a developer offering to clear up the site, if development permission were granted. Local residents are concerned that a development which might otherwise not be acceptable would be allowed through because it provided an easy option for dealing with the problem of contaminated land. That applies to both Badnell's tip and Sandford farm.

[Mrs. Theresa May]

The third issue is the guidance given to local authorities on the aspects that they may take into material consideration when considering planning applications. Again, I shall illustrate the problem with an example from my constituency. I refer to the East Park farm development at Charvil where, following a public inquiry, 232 houses—family homes—are being built on the edge of the village, which has no school and only one small shop. The children from those homes will have to travel into a nearby village, with all the resulting congestion problems on the roads.

Local authorities should be required to take more notice of the more general infrastructure features when they consider planning applications for significant development, such as a housing development of that size. Such considerations include schools and whether the local water supply can cope with the number of houses to be built on a site. As I understand it, there is no statutory requirement to consult water companies about whether the water supply will cope with increased demand. Local authorities should examine those issues more carefully when considering such developments. They should ask whether a village can cope with a significant development on its doorstep.

I have raised three issues: multiple applications in the planning process, contaminated land, and the consideration of infrastructure issues. There is considerable interest in this Adjournment debate in my constituency—particularly because of the Badnell's tip issue—and the story made the front page of the *Maidenhead Advertiser*. That is a significant local paper to which I have referred in the House previously. Local residents are very interested in the outcome of the debate and in the Minister's response. They hope that, because the issues facing Maidenhead are also experienced up and down the country, the Government will consider them sympathetically. I hope that the Minister will respond positively.

1.20 pm

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) on her extremely fluent presentation of issues relating to several sites in her constituency, which have clearly raised concerns locally. She highlighted local interest in the debate, and I only hope that those who read the *Maidenhead Advertiser* do not pick up on her reference to herself as the "Member of Parliament for tips"—I cannot think of a less appropriate description.

Before I respond to the specific issues that the hon. Lady raised, I shall put them into context. The Government retain a firm commitment to achieving sustainable development through a plan-led system. We believe this to be the most effective way of reconciling the demands for land for development and the need to protect the environment. The plan-led system has a vital role to play in identifying and providing sites for necessary development in locations that do not compromise the needs of future generations. It provides greater certainty for developers and business, and an appropriate framework for them to take investment decisions. At the same time—and perhaps more important—it allows anyone with an interest to be involved in shaping the policies that determine future decisions on land use. The system must be open and accountable.

We have a well-established system of statutory development plans, and we have no proposals for changing those basic arrangements. However, if the system is to survive, it must be made more efficient. A number of proposals for changes to the way in which local plans and unitary development plans are prepared and adopted were put forward by our predecessors last January. I certainly share their view that the current procedures are too cumbersome.

Some commentators have suggested that the Government are interested only in speed and in getting plans adopted as soon as possible—even if that is to the detriment of public involvement in the plan-making process and the quality of the end product. That is not the case. The Government are committed to proper public involvement in the plan-making process and to achieving a high-quality plan.

We have considered the responses to consultation on the issue initiated by the previous Government, and we intend to implement the changes to procedures related to the deposit stage, designed to encourage local planning authorities to make real efforts to negotiate with objectors and thereby resolve objections before plans reach the inquiry. There is certainly some scope for improving inquiry procedures, possibly involving the introduction of procedural rules, and we shall pursue measures to reduce the time spent on modifications after the inquiry. We hope that we can achieve a position where modifications become the exception rather than the rule.

On the other hand, we have decided not to pursue changes that would reduce the rights of people to be involved in the preparation of development plans. Similarly, we have decided not to take forward the previous Government's proposal that the recommendations in the report on the public local inquiry into a plan should be made binding on the local authority. We consider it important that the authority should remain accountable for the planning policies adopted in its area. Some of the changes can be taken forward by the Government, and we hope to issue consultation revisions to the development plan regulations and PPG12 before the new year.

We are also actively looking at ways of improving both the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning appeals system. We want to speed up the handling of appeals and deliver quicker decisions. I say that with some feeling, having had to deal with a large number of planning appeals over the past few months—some of which have been outstanding for far too long. Many individuals and organisations have recently given their views on a number of suggestions to speed up the planning appeals process. That is very helpful, and we aim to build on those suggestions.

The importance of the issues and the need to get the changes right are reflected in the variety and volume of comments: more than 250 responses have been received. The message is positive overall—although some reservations were expressed. Most respondents welcomed the main objective of improving speed and efficiency while retaining the essential elements of fairness, openness and impartiality. We have been giving careful

thought to all the responses, but have not yet reached any final conclusions about future changes. Clearly, a number of the proposals are capable of being implemented in the short term either administratively or through secondary legislation but, where necessary, we do not rule out the possibility of primary legislation if and when the opportunity arises.

Having established the context, I come to the specific issues raised by the hon. Lady. I start with Badnell's tip, which is located behind homes in Blackamore lane to the north of Maidenhead town centre. The hon. Lady referred to her constituents' concerns about the number of planning applications that have been made for the site over the years. While the site has been subject to a number of applications, not all have gone to determination. Applications on the site for a hotel and for a football ground were withdrawn. The site was subject to retail applications in 1992–93, but they were also withdrawn. In the past 10 years, I understand that there have been only two appeals on the site.

The site was allocated in the local plan for housing in the 1970s. A local plan inquiry was held in 1995–96. The inspector came down against proposals for housing—even though that is what the local authority suggested—because he was not satisfied at the time about the remediation measures necessary to deal with the contamination to which the hon. Lady referred. I was slightly alarmed to hear that an inspector wandered around the site wearing a gas mask, and I am delighted that the hon. Lady felt sufficiently confident to visit the site without taking such measures.

That confidence is obviously shared by the local authority, which has undertaken further studies aimed at solving the contamination issue. It proposes to use the site for about 120 dwellings, and views it as an urban brown-field site. Because of the very real pressures for housing throughout the south-east, not just in Maidenhead, it is important—and very much part of the Government's thinking—that, where appropriate, brown-field sites should be used for housing in order to avoid placing unnecessary pressure on the green belt and the countryside.

I also understand that there are currently proposals by the Michael Shanly Group for an edge-of-town superstore on the site. We understand that remediation is required to make the site suitable for such development and that the proposals have been subject to considerable local controversy. An appeal was lodged against non-determination of permission by the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead and a public inquiry was held. The many concerns raised at the inquiry will, of course, be fully considered by the inspector in reaching his decision. The inspector's report is awaited by the local planning authority.

As the decision is still under consideration, I am sure that the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot discuss the details of the proposals. The Secretary of State and Ministers in the Department have a quasi-judicial capacity in the matter. I hope that my remarks have at least put the issues in context.

I come now to the implications for PPG6 with regard to town centres and retail developments. There are several general concerns in that area. The Government reaffirm the objectives of the current planning policy guidance in PPG6 on town centres and retail developments. The guidance seeks to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of our existing city, town and district centres. That will remain a key pillar of Government policy.

We are also keen to ensure that, where possible, development is planned in a manner that is consistent with the maintenance and defence of the environment. Sustainability issues are at the forefront of the Government's approach. When we consider the kind of development that the hon. Lady mentioned towards the end of her speech—I apologise for forgetting the precise location to which she referred, involving the proposal for a large development at the edge of a village—issues such as transport, infrastructure, how the development would relate to the existing settlement, and whether there are adequate water supplies and other facilities must be material considerations if we are to contemplate such developments from the point of view of sustainability.

On the issue of contaminated land, which the hon. Lady rightly highlighted, local authorities were required to draw up registers under section 143 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. The previous Government withdrew their proposals for statutory registers in 1993 and instigated instead a review of contaminated land policy. The basic argument against registers was that they could unnecessarily blight land. I understand that.

The review led to a recommendation that there should be a specific contaminated land power in place of the general statutory nuisance power. The previous Government took that power in section 57 of the Environment Act 1995, which inserted a new part IIA into the Environmental Protection Act 1990. That has not yet been implemented, but the Government are considering whether, and if so when, to bring part IIA into operation. We expect to make an announcement shortly.

Let me now refer to repetitive planning applications. I am aware that concern is sometimes expressed about the resource implications of developers submitting more than one planning application for the same piece of land.

A power was introduced through the Planning and Compensation Act 1991 which gives local planning authorities a measure of protection against the behaviour of a small number of developers who submit repetitive applications in an attempt to wear down the resistance of local communities and planning committees. The power enables authorities to turn away planning applications when a substantially similar proposal has been rejected by the Secretary of State on appeal, or following a call-in within the previous two years and where there has been no significant change in the material circumstances.

I appreciate that that power does not go as far as some would wish. It does not control the situation in which an applicant submits repeated applications to the local planning authority, but does not take any of them to appeal. In those situations, we must be careful not to tilt the scales too far and remove from the applicant his legitimate right to appeal. However, I am also concerned at the extra burden that such repeated applications may place on the local authority. It is therefore my intention to look again at that issue, to see what further action might be taken.

The hon. Lady also mentioned motorway service areas. I am well aware that there are a number of competing proposals for motorway service areas on the section of the M4 in the Maidenhead area.

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

A joint public local planning inquiry has been held into a planning appeal concerning proposals for a motorway service area west of junction 8/9—which is one junction—on the M4. The other site considered at the joint inquiry is in Bracknell Forest district council area.

The inspector's report is unlikely to be received in the Government office for some months, and the proposed decision will be submitted to Ministers in due course. I hope that the hon. Lady will appreciate that, because of our quasi-judicial role, I cannot comment on the merits of the scheme, but I am sure that she is aware that, as the final decision will be taken in the Department, we shall consider carefully all the issues that she raised, and the other representations that have been made.

I am aware that the inquiry has lasted since January and has only just concluded. We are also aware that there have been concerns about the cost of such lengthy inquiries to the local planning authority. I can assure the hon. Lady that we too are concerned about delays in the planning process and are looking at mechanisms to speed it up in the future. That will not remedy the problem that she highlighted, but it may help in the future.

I understand that further developers are also competing to provide MSAs on that section of the M4. In considering proposals for further MSAs, the Government will have regard to the planning policy guidance note, PPG13 on transport, which states that the minimum gap between any two MSAs should normally be 15 miles. That does not mean that the guidance positively recommends provision of MSAs at 15-mile intervals, but it means that the need for a new facility nearer than about 15 miles to an existing one would not normally be sufficient to outweigh objections on road safety and traffic management grounds.

The guidance does not have in mind any maximum interval beyond which there would be any presumption in favour of the siting of an MSA. The precise number and frequency will depend on private sector responses to market pressures tempered by normal planning considerations. There is no change in the normal operation of the land use planning process, including land use planning policy. Local planning authorities should bear it in mind that, where MSAs are proposed within a short distance of another, my Department will provide signs for only one of them. It will also direct refusal of any scheme accessed directly from the motorway if its proximity to another MSA would disqualify it from signing.

I am conscious that the hon. Lady has raised a large number of detailed issues, and I have not been able to cover every aspect of what she said. I invite her, if she has further concerns, to write to me. I shall be only too happy to try to give her a more detailed response on those matters, apart from those on which I have indicated that we are not able to comment at this stage because the matter may come to our Department on appeal. I repeat my appreciation of the way in which she has raised those important matters, and hope that my reply has helped her and her constituents to understand how the Government are responding to their concerns.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Welfare to Work

1. **Mr. Kidney:** What assessment she has made of the potential for the Government's welfare to work proposals to benefit the overseas aid programme. [14107]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue, but as the schemes are designed to help young people available for work in the UK they cannot be used to support work overseas. However, we are contacting the relevant development organisations to draw their attention to the proposals and to suggest that they examine the scope for participating in the scheme at their headquarters in Britain.

Mr. Kidney: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Is it not exciting that Labour's new deal for young unemployed people may lead to more young Britons helping, albeit in this country, to eradicate poverty and suffering in other parts of the world? Is it not pleasing, too, that that answer shows that the Government are capable of working corporately to meet important policy objectives? Does he think that such success might lead to a wider appreciation of and concern for suffering in less fortunate parts of the world?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Such involvement would be doubly valuable in that it would help young people and the work of organisations such as Voluntary Service Overseas and Oxfam. I understand from the Department for Education and Employment that those organisations have not yet shown an interest, but we are encouraging them to do so, and I hope that from today they will take up such schemes.

Global Free Trade

2. **Mr. Butterfill:** What research her Department has evaluated into the impact of global free trade on third world countries. [14108]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): My Department keeps abreast of most research in this sector and is particularly attentive to work by international development organisations including the World bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. We also maintain a dialogue with non-governmental organisations and academic institutions which are engaged in the sector.

Mr. Butterfill: Would the right hon. Lady confirm her personal commitment and that of her Department to the principle of global free trade? Will she give an undertaking that both she and her Department will work towards the principle of totally free international trade by the year 2020?

Clare Short: Globalisation is a fact of life; it is not a question of whether people are for or against it. It is as big a historical change as the industrial revolution and can bring great benefits to the world, but it can also have damaging consequences. Recent reports say that it will benefit many developing countries, but that there is a danger that some countries could be completely marginalised from the world economy, and that it could also cause increased inequality and marginalisation in the developed world.

Of course we favour globalisation and the benefits that it brings. We believe that we have to intervene to try to ensure that those benefits are distributed fairly. The great challenge for the industrialised world is to believe in free trade in agricultural goods also, which would benefit the developing world but means that we have to put our house in order.

Mrs. Fyfe: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is often difficult to reconcile free trade with fair trade, and that we must enhance fair trade? Following the launch of the White Paper last week, will she therefore undertake to let the House know from time to time how Members' efforts in their constituencies to enhance fair trade are getting on, and what expansion there is in that regard?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend that we must ensure that the growth of world trade does not drive down environmental and labour standards and that it produces an improvement of life for humanity and not competition through reduced standards. I also agree with my hon. Friend about fair trade and the ethical movements that are growing and strengthening in Britain. British consumers want to know that the produce they buy and the places where their pension funds are invested are not exploiting labour or damaging the environment. Such movements have great potential impact to reach out across the world and increasingly encourage business to source ethically and improve standards worldwide.

Montserrat

3. **Mr. Baldry:** What progress has been made in implementing the housing programme for Montserrat. [14109]

Clare Short: I authorised the provision of £6.5 million for new houses in July 1997. Fifty new permanent houses have been completed and are being handed over to the Government of Montserrat this week. They are due to be occupied from 12 November. A further 50 are under construction and are scheduled to be ready for occupation by the end of December 1997.

I should add for the benefit of the House that the recent scientific evidence from Montserrat is extremely worrying. There is new evidence that the north of the island may not be as safe as was previously thought. Obviously, we must press on, but we have to review the position due to those worrying developments.

Mr. Baldry: No one underestimates the difficulties on Montserrat and the challenges that the Government face

there. Is it not slightly surprising that the Secretary of State has yet to find time to visit Montserrat? Had she done so, some of the confusion in recent weeks might not have been quite so great.

The line from the Government has been that the slowness of the housing programme was due to an alleged strike on Montserrat, whereas the Chief Minister of Montserrat says that there has been no strike whatsoever but simply a slowness of funds from our Government to the Government of Montserrat to pay for the housing programme. Perhaps it is all part of the confusion that no one is quite sure which bits the right hon. Lady is responsible for and which bits are the responsibility of Baroness Symons. Perhaps the Secretary of State will take the opportunity to clarify the issue. Has there been a delay in getting funds to Montserrat? And for which matters is she now responsible?

Clare Short: The right hon. Gentleman might like to look at the dates. Fifty houses were authorised in July. They were built and handed over. There was some delay in installing the electrics because of a "sick-out", as strikes are called in Montserrat. That is regrettable in the current circumstances.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the fracturing of responsibility in Montserrat is a serious problem. My Department is responsible for expenditures from our budget for projects on Montserrat. The Foreign Office is responsible for co-ordination and lead decision making. There is an elected Government of Montserrat and there is also a governor. That creates great difficulties for efficient decision making.

When we have dealt with the present crisis, we need to review how we manage dependent territories, as there is room for improvement.

Ms Abbott: Is my right hon. Friend aware that more than 300 people in Montserrat are still in temporary shelters? Many of them have been in those shelters for more than two years, often in appalling conditions. Men, women and children are separated only by thin curtains and there is no sanitation. Is she aware of the concern on Montserrat about the slowness of the Government's house building programme?

Clare Short: I am aware of those conditions, but my hon. Friend referred to a two-year delay. She will be aware that we have not been in power for all that time. I authorised a house-building programme in July, and the first 50 houses are about to be occupied. I am aware that the management of the shelters leaves a lot to be desired.

In addition, large numbers of people who live on Montserrat have expressed a wish to leave the island, and I am worried that their desires have not been properly processed. As I said in my main answer, the recent scientific advice is extremely worrying: we have to review new building in the north of the island and whether it remains safe for large numbers of people to remain there.

Mr. Öpik: Will the Secretary of State clarify whether, in her view, the north of the island is safely habitable? What plans are there for a large-scale evacuation while a sustainable development plan is being prepared for the island?

Clare Short: As I said to the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), that is a decision for the Foreign Office. We received reports in September that the volcanic ash, which is predominantly in the south of the island but blows everywhere, is more dangerous than was previously thought and can cause silicosis. It was thought that the north of the island would be safe, but the ash blowing around could affect human health. We have just received new advice from the scientists that the volcano could produce droppings—clast, or whatever it is called—on the north of the island, creating new dangers. We have just received that advice, and it needs to be reviewed urgently.

Ethical Trading

4. **Helen Jackson:** What contacts her Department has with organisations advocating fair trade and ethical investment; and what consideration she is giving to further development in these areas. [14110]

Clare Short: As I said, I am very keen to encourage and reinforce the fair trade and ethical investment consumer movements in every possible way. My Department has numerous and growing contacts with groups interested in fair trade and ethical investment in developing countries. I especially welcome our increasing contacts with groups within the British business community, which is increasingly interested in the issue. The potential of those movements to improve labour standards and environmental protection for large numbers of people in developing countries is considerable. We are asking British companies and non-governmental organisations to work together towards those goals.

Helen Jackson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer and congratulate her on what last week's White Paper had to say about fair trade. May I suggest, however, that the really difficult part will be in achieving any world consensus or action on practical ways in which fair trade and ethical investment can operate? Nevertheless, I congratulate my right hon. Friend and you, Madam Speaker, on launching a practical example in the House today showing that it is possible to drink fair trade coffee. Not only does such coffee offer production workers good wages and conditions—it tastes very good, too.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I agree with her that it is very good that the House will now consume ethical coffee which has been produced without abusing labour or pesticides—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members sneer at ethics, but the British people are interested in them. Like you, Madam Speaker, I had a cup of that coffee this morning and it was extremely good. As I have said, ethical movements and consumers' interest in such movements are potentially very influential in the world.

Currently, my Department is assisting all British supermarkets and non-governmental organisations in talks on a code for ethical sourcing so that the British people will know that everything on the shelves in those supermarkets is being produced with decent labour standards and non-abuse of the environment. The value of the produce ordered in developing countries by the top 10 British supermarkets is greater than the total income of the world's 35 poorest countries, so the potential power of this is enormous.

Mr. Wilkinson: May I refer the right hon. Lady to section 3 of her White Paper, which deals specifically

with fair trade and ethical investment? That section advocates reform of the European Union's common agricultural policy, and the first paragraph of the section stresses the importance of consistency. In the reform that she will advocate, will she advocate elimination of European Union subsidies to tobacco producers in the southern European states—or is the promotion of tobacco production in the developed world a special case?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue—which includes the issue of tobacco production. However, I prefer to deal with the matter straight on, rather than to play silly political games.

The issue of trade liberalisation extends to agriculture. Although industrialised countries frequently lecture developing countries about the need to open their markets to trade, we have highly protected and highly subsidised agriculture—dumping lots of agricultural produce on world markets and undermining the capacity of those countries to develop. I am against such subsidies in principle, including for tobacco. *[Interruption.]* I take no lessons from Opposition Members.

Due to the proposal to widen the European Union, there is a very good opportunity for—and a driving commitment to—common agricultural policy reform. It is the duty of my Department to ensure that the interests of the developing world, and its chance to work its way out of poverty, are taken into account in the review of the CAP.

White Paper (Representations)

5. **Ann Clwyd:** What representations her Department has received in response to the White Paper on International Development in respect of its emphasis on poverty. [14111]

Mr. Foulkes: We had about 150 detailed written submissions from outside bodies in preparing the White Paper, many of which called for a focus on poverty elimination. Since its publication on 5 November, the White Paper has had an enthusiastic and positive reception, particularly for its commitment to work towards ending world poverty.

Ann Clwyd: What mechanisms will the Department use to target investment from British companies on the poorest countries, and how will those targets benefit the poorest people in those countries?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We shall be working with our development partners to help poorer countries to create an enabling environment which will attract more investment. In particular, we shall work to reduce initial costs and the perceived risks of investments which support the aim of poverty elimination.

Dr. Tonge: Does the Minister agree that it is very sad that a country as rich as ours cannot increase its proportion of aid to developing countries? I understand that the Department is to review and redirect funds over the next two years. Will the Minister give an undertaking that the review will be totally transparent and that the House will be told which countries and organisations are to be the winners and losers?

Mr. Foulkes: I am beginning to wonder whether the hon. Lady has read the White Paper. It commits the Government clearly to reversing the decline in money spent in development which occurred under the previous Government—a decline from 0.51 per cent. of total spending and rising when Labour left office to 0.27 per cent. and falling now.

We also intend to create a public-private partnership of the Commonwealth Development Corporation, which will put hundreds of millions of extra pounds into the development programme. It is about time the hon. Lady recognised that, and congratulated the new Government on what we are doing.

Sir Alastair Goodlad: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that abject poverty can be created by sudden natural disaster? What has been his Department's response to the worsening crisis in southern Somalia as a result of flooding of the River Giuba, which has reportedly caused at least 150,000 people to be cast into total destitution over the past day or two in a situation of worsening anarchy?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that question. As soon as I heard about the situation in southern Somalia, I discussed it with our officials, and we have made it absolutely clear—my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has also made it clear—that we shall make resources available through the international aid agencies working in Somalia. As soon as we get a request we shall consider it sympathetically. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support.

Mr. Connarty: Will the Minister confirm that he is making all haste to allow the Commonwealth Development Corporation to access private financial sums to invest in ethical projects such as those that we have discussed? Can he give the House some idea of the time scale for the changes that he intends to bring about?

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. In fact, the purpose of the public-private partnership is to access more money to help poorer countries. It will, however, require legislation, which we hope can be introduced in the next Session. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for indicating his willingness to serve on the Committee that will examine that legislation.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

6. **Mr. Spring:** What are her plans for the future of the Commonwealth Development Corporation. [14112]

Clare Short: As has just been said, my plans are to propose to Parliament that private investors should be invited to invest money in the CDC, turning a state corporation into a partnership between the public and private sectors. The Government will retain a substantial minority holding and a golden share, which will ensure that the CDC remains a development organisation. The new arrangements will enable it to increase private sector investment into the poorest countries.

Mr. Spring: How long will the Government retain their golden share? Does the Secretary of State accept that there is a risk that the CDC could be acquired by an organisation not dedicated to the fullest implementation of the developmental process?

Clare Short: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about that. We intend that the golden share will be held in perpetuity.

The CDC is working on strengthening the ethical code governing its work. It wants a public-private partnership. It does not want to be an entirely private sector organisation. We do not want that, either. It can act as an important bridge for private sector investment in the world's poorest countries, which do not currently receive such investment. We hope that that will be followed by pure private sector investment. I give the hon. Gentleman the absolute guarantee that the CDC will not become a private investment institution. There are plenty of those. It has a different job.

Montserrat

7. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** If she will make a statement on assistance to Montserrat. [14113]

Mr. Foulkes: Since the start of the volcanic crisis, around £45.8 million of emergency aid, development assistance and budgetary aid has been committed by Her Majesty's Government to the needs of Montserrat. When I visited Montserrat in September, we agreed to produce a sustainable development plan for the northern third of the island so that people can continue to live there as long as it remains safe to do so. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, I met the chief scientist of the Montserrat volcanic observatory earlier and there are further doubts about safety which we have to consider urgently.

Mr. Winterton: I am grateful to the Minister for that information. Does he agree with the Chief Minister of Montserrat that it is wrong to use the same budget for assistance to British dependent territories as is used for aid to India, Pakistan and Uganda? Does not aid currently go from London offices to Barbados offices and thence to Montserrat? Could we not cut out one of those stages?

Mr. Foulkes: I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman, although I am surprised to hear myself say that. He has raised a good point about where the money comes from. If he has had the opportunity to read the White Paper, he will know that the reasonable needs of dependent territories will remain a first call on the aid budget. Barbados has been taken out of the line of decision making; there is a direct link between Montserrat and our Department in the United Kingdom and I talk regularly to the Chief Minister to ensure that things are done as quickly as possible and that the decisions made are implemented as quickly as possible.

Mr. Gapes: Will the Minister look urgently into the problem faced by many people from Montserrat who have been evacuated to this country through no fault of their own but are being subjected to the three-year rule on going into higher and further education and therefore not getting grants from local authorities? Will he discuss that with his colleagues from the Department for Education and Employment to find a way to assist British dependent territory citizens while they are in this country?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is a little out of date on the arrangements for citizens of Montserrat. Special arrangements have been made for them. On his most recent visit to the United Kingdom, Chief Minister Brandt discussed that issue with Baroness Blackstone and I know that the Department for Education and Employment is particularly concerned about it.

Mr. Faber: Does the hon. Gentleman recall the assurance that he gave the House on 1 July that he would make strong representations to the defence review on behalf of the West Indies guard ship, which continues to play a vital role in bringing relief to the people of Montserrat? Can he explain the written answer that I have received from the Secretary of State for Defence saying that no such representations have been made? Did it merely slip the Minister's mind that he gave the House such an assurance, or does he no longer consider the role of the guard ship to be as important as it was?

Mr. Foulkes: The West Indies guard ship plays an especially important role, as I saw myself when I visited Monserrat and met the captain and many of its crew. I have spoken personally to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence about the guard ship, which is perhaps why the hon. Gentleman got the answer he did. Officials from our Department are participating in discussions on the strategic defence review, and those points and others will be made.

Child Labour

8. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** What steps the Government are taking to eliminate child labour. [14114]

Clare Short: We are working with the International Labour Organisation and developing countries to support programmes immediately to ban hazardous and exploitative child labour and to put in place plans to phase out excessive child labour and get the children into school. At the international conference on child labour in Oslo last month, I announced support for a new project in Pakistan and my willingness to work with other countries to reach our goal.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for those comments. Does she agree that poverty lies at the heart of child labour and the exploitation of children, and that the way to eradicate those problems is to eradicate world poverty?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is useful to examine our history on the matter and then we learn the right lessons. We used to have high levels of child labour and low levels of child education, but improvements in living conditions, as well as the spread of education, brought child labour to an end. We must have similar programmes in other countries to ban immediately the most exploitative and hazardous labour, and to increase the number of children in education and the opportunities of their parents to gain employment. That process of change is connected with plans for poverty eradication.

Mr. Ian Bruce: I congratulate the Secretary of State on transforming the way of dealing with child labour. The worst problems of many third-world countries are not the young children who work in sensible jobs. Will she focus the attention of her Department on street children, who work on their own behalf and are often badly abused?

That should be the first focus of our help; the other problems should begin to resolve as the economies of those countries improve.

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is right. The evidence in Bangladesh shows that well intentioned moves by the United States of America to ban the import of any garments produced by child labour led to many children going on to the streets as beggars and child prostitutes. That is why we need an overview of the problem to deal with the most exploitative mistreatment of children and to work with Governments to phase out child labour and get children into school, instead of having one-off boycotts.

Palestinian Authority

9. **Mr. Gunnell:** If she will make a statement on the level of financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority in the current year; and what is the projected level for 1998–99. [14115]

Mr. Foulkes: Bilateral assistance to the Palestinian National Authority in this financial year will amount to about £10 million. That is in addition to our £6 million contribution in 1997 to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees and our one-sixth share of the European Commission's 50 million ecu programme of assistance to the West Bank and Gaza. Bilateral funding for the next financial year will be decided early in the next calendar year.

Mr. Gunnell: I thank the Minister for that reply. Will he give particular attention, when he has some additional funds, to the needs of the Palestinian National Authority and projects in Palestine? I am sure that he is aware of the disappointment felt by people who live in Gaza and the West Bank at the restrictions on their borders. It is important that we ensure that progress is made in that territory to support arguments to put to those who wish to take up arms to support their cause. We need to urge them to join in the work to make the peace process effective.

Mr. Foulkes: I am sympathetic to the point made by my hon. Friend. Expenditure in the past three years has ranged between £3.5 million and £6 million. I am sure that he will agree that £10 million in the current financial year is a significant and welcome increase.

Mr. David Atkinson: As the Palestinian refugee question is one of the final status issues to be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian Authority by May 1999—in 18 months' time—does the Minister agree that Governments should be budgeting now for their donations to the cost of resettlement out of the 59 camps, as well as their contributions to the Palestinian Authority and to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency? What initiatives does he have in mind to draw that need to the attention of Governments during the forthcoming British presidency of the European Union?

Mr. Foulkes: We shall certainly take account of those points, and we shall raise them on behalf of the United Kingdom Government in our discussions with UNRWA.

Dr. Starkey: As the White Paper stresses the importance of private investment in helping with development effort, does my hon. Friend agree that the current closure of the west bank makes it incredibly difficult for private industry to invest there or in Gaza, because industries have almost no stable future in that environment?

Mr. Foulkes: I agree with every word that my hon. Friend has said.

Land Mines

10. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** If she will make a statement regarding the Government's intended stance at the forthcoming Ottawa conference in connection with anti–personnel land mines. [14117]

Clare Short: I plan to attend the ministerial conference and convention signing ceremony on 3 December, and I shall proudly sign on behalf of Britain to join in the land mine ban. I will emphasise the Government's commitment to achieving the widest possible support for a total ban on anti-personnel land mines. We shall follow up the Ottawa convention in other negotiating bodies. We shall also pursue with vigour our programme of de-mining. The British delegation will take part in the parallel round table discussions, which will include discussion of plans to speed up and co-ordinate de-mining internationally.

Mr. Robertson: I thank the right hon. Lady for that answer, and I wish her well in her attempts to secure a worldwide ban. Is she aware that many land mines throughout the world are cleared by children as young as 10? What will the Government do to prevent that?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is right; we need both a ban and a speeding up of de-mining. At current rates of clearance, it will take 1,000 years to clear the land mines already out there, and more are being laid as we speak. We must speed clearance and enlarge the capacity of the countries that have so many land mines to clear them for themselves. That is the only way to get the speed up.

I am not aware of children actually de-mining, but many children suffer grave injuries as a result of mines when they go out to play or to collect wood. We must make more urgent progress on the matter.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [14137] **Mr. Luff:** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 November.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. I shall have further meetings with them later today.

Mr. Luff: Which Minister took the decision to exempt formula one from the tobacco sponsorship ban?

The Prime Minister: I shall set out our position for the hon. Gentleman with enthusiasm and relish.

It was a collective decision, made in the normal way. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] If the hon. Gentleman listens, I can explain how.

There have been discussions over a period of time, ever since the European Union directive was raised about the impact on sport. On 5 June, my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health told the European Council:

"The UK Government shares the broad objectives of the draft Directive. But there are unresolved legal questions about its scope, as well as practical issues, such as the impact on sports if it is agreed that the Directive should extend to sports sponsorship by tobacco companies."

Following that meeting, there were meetings and discussions about sport and the effect on sports sponsorship of a ban on tobacco sponsorship. The Minister for Public Health met representatives of formula one on 23 September. They met Chancellor Kohl on 28 September and had earlier met Prime Minister Prodi. I met them on 16 October. No decisions were taken then. A number of different options were under discussion, including legislating through subsidiarity or a period of derogation for all sport.

Finally, at the beginning of last week, there was the decision to seek a specific exemption for formula one and then to seek a worldwide voluntary agreement so as to avoid grand prix in other countries being shown here without restriction. Once that route was chosen, I recognised that there was obviously an appearance of conflict of interest. After discussion with the general secretary of the Labour party, we sought Sir Patrick Neill's advice. He gave it; we followed it to the letter. It was the right decision for the right reasons. Can anyone imagine the Tory party ever returning a donation?

Q2. [14138] **Mr. Quinn:** I am sure that many people in Scarborough and Whitby, and indeed in the rest of the nation, will support the Government's intention to introduce legislation on foreign donations to political parties. Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only should the terms of reference—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. All hon. Members who are on their feet will be heard. Others do not have to listen, but hon. Members who are speaking will be heard.

Mr. Quinn: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Committee on Standards in Public Life should not only be given the widest terms of reference but be asked to deliver its deliberations at the earliest opportunity, not only from the point of view of the people in the country, but with the widest support of the House? *[Laughter.]*

The Prime Minister: Conservative Members may laugh, but they refused to have such an investigation when they were in power. We announced at the time of Sir Patrick Neill's appointment as successor to Lord Nolan that his remit would be extended to cover all aspects of party funding. I can confirm that we are asking Sir Patrick to consider the whole area of party funding: whether donors should be disclosed; whether the size of donations should be disclosed; whether there should be a limit on individual donations; whether there should be a limit on overall spending; and whether there should be different arrangements altogether, such as increased state funding.

The investigation is long overdue; it is one that we urged in opposition, when the Conservative Government refused to have it. Sir Patrick Neill will be able to make his recommendations, and we will all then be playing on a level playing field.

Mr. Hague: Is the Prime Minister aware that the leading governing bodies of sport met this morning and decided to ask for a personal meeting with him about tobacco advertising? Is he happy to have such a meeting on the same basis as his meeting with formula one?

The Prime Minister: Of course I am, but they have not sought such a meeting before. If they seek such a meeting now, of course they can have it.

Mr. Hague: They are seeking such a meeting now, and I am happy to hear that the Prime Minister will see them. When he does, will he consider the letter sent to the Government last week by the World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association, which says that:

"all the arguments made by Formula One for exemption can also be made by"

billiards and snooker? It continues:

"It is grossly unfair that the strength of a powerful lobby should"

prevail

"over the reasoned argument of less well funded sports. Surely this is not the way of New Labour."

Will the Prime Minister consider a temporary exemption for billiards and snooker, as he did for formula one?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman understands. In the directive there is already a temporary derogation for sport. The question is whether it is long enough and right for formula one, which is in a special position. *[Laughter.]* Let me explain. There are some 15 grand prix countries, of which some, including the United Kingdom, have no legal tobacco sponsorship restrictions or very limited ones. All the eight others that have restrictions on sponsorship have either special exemptions for formula one alone or special arrangements for formula one.

Australia has the toughest anti-sponsorship laws in the world, but specifically exempts formula one. In Canada there are new regulations to prohibit sponsorship, but auto racing is to be exempt. There are specific exemptions in Portugal, Germany and France. In Italy there is a ban that covers formula one, but formula one takes place, there is sponsorship, and a nominal fine is levied on the company every year.

The right hon. Gentleman may disagree with the decision that we have taken, but when all those other countries have specific exemptions, I ask him to have a care for the effect on British industry if we follow the course that he is advocating.

Mr. Hague: It is no good the Prime Minister talking about the European directive, when the European Commission has said of his announcement:

"it's a disaster, a complete U turn. This could spell the end of the directive, obliging the Commission to withdraw the proposal."

It is no good his talking about the European directive. Is he aware of the deep anxieties in sports other than formula one such as angling and cricket, one of the representatives of which said this morning:

"It is particularly disappointing that a Labour Government of all governments should strangle the life out of working-class sports."

Is the Prime Minister now prepared to give the same consideration to those sports as to formula one?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman blocked the directive on tobacco advertising. The Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member blocked the directive.

Mr. Hague: Is not the Prime Minister making up his policy as he goes along? Is it not the case that the Government are in turmoil and chaos over this? Is it not the case that this is another broken promise to go along with pensions, tax, tuition fees and cold weather payments? I am not accusing the Labour party of being paid to break its promises; it breaks them for free all the time. Is this not what happens when a party seeks office without a principle, value, or belief to its name?

The Prime Minister: I think that people remember what happened: a Tory party that undermined the national health service; a Tory party that wrecked Britain's schools; a Labour party putting more money into health and more money into schools; the welfare-to-work programme; a Tory party that said that it would never put VAT on fuel and then put it on; a Tory party that cannot even make up its mind whether it disagrees with the decision that we have taken or thinks that we have taken it for the wrong reasons.

We were told at lunchtime that the right hon. Gentleman had some killer points; that it was an open goal and he was going to put the ball in the net. He has walked up to the penalty spot and booted it over the bar.

Dr. George Turner: Will my right hon. Friend recognise, on reflection. that there is a long history and deep experience of receiving money from industrial sources both national and international in the Tory party? Would it not, therefore, be appropriate that, in looking to a review of the way in which politics is funded, all parties represented in this Chamber should open their books for the past five years so that the public can see what they have been about?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Conservative party has never disclosed any of the donations that it has received, and it has not even paid back Asil Nadir's £360,000.

Mr. Ashdown: Leaving aside the Government's extraordinary change of policy on cigarette advertising, which I hope they will reconsider, may I return to the question of political funding? The Prime Minister's statement that the Neill inquiry into political funding will have the widest remit and will be required to produce its outcome as soon as possible is welcome—we cannot lose any time in restoring public confidence in how we fund our politics.

However, in that context, I remind the Prime Minister that, more than 100 years ago, in 1883, we decided to limit the amount that constituencies could spend on electoral campaigning. Surely the time has now arrived to end once and for all this damaging warfare—this arms race—between the parties and limit the amount of money that can be spent on national campaigning as well.

The Prime Minister: First, let me deal with the right hon. Gentleman's statement that the decision is extraordinary. I have set out how virtually every other country has exemptions for formula one if it has a grand prix, so it is not a very extraordinary decision. I would also draw his attention to the jobs that are at risk if we lose formula one from this country—the 8,000 people directly employed in formula one. The chairman of the Motorsport Industry Association said earlier today that, if formula one leaves the country, there will be problems for the whole of the British motor racing industry. So, whether people agree or disagree with the decision, there is at least a perfectly sensible basis for it, given what happens in other countries.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about party funding, I agree that there is a case for looking at all these things. I hope that Sir Patrick Neill can look at every issue connected with party funding. We will support him strongly in doing that. I would say only that for years I have fought elections with the Labour party being outspent by the Tory party £4 or £5 to £1, because they never disclose the source of their donations at all. What I want is a level playing field, and if that comes with restrictions on amounts and restrictions on the level of money that can be spent in elections, I am perfectly happy with that. What I will not do is go into election fighting when the Tories can raise as much money as they want and never have to disclose it—without the Labour party's being able to raise money, too.

Laura Moffatt: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the staff of Crawley hospital will be much happier this winter when they discover that they now have a £450,000 share of the £300 million for crisis admissions? Does not such news make people working in the caring professions believe that working for the national health service is more worth while?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Having gone around several hospitals, I know that although people still suffer as a result of many of the things done by the previous Government, they at last believe that they have a Government who believe in the national health service. We have the extra £300 million going in this year and an extra £1.2 billion next year, and we are doing our very best to ensure that health service funding is put on a stable footing for the long term. That will be enormously welcome to everyone who works in the health service.

Q3. [14139] **Mr. Fallon:** Instead of waiting for details of the Ecclestone donation to be forced out of him four weeks later, why did the Prime Minister not refer that donation to the public standards watchdog immediately after the meeting on 16 October?

The Prime Minister: Because the papers have been referred to Sir Patrick Neill—[HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] At the end of last week. [HON. MEMBERS: "When?"] They ask the question, but do not want the answer. The papers were referred to Sir Patrick Neill, who then reported back

on Monday. The moment he reported back, we published his advice and followed it. I repeat: I do not believe that the party the hon. Gentleman represents would ever have behaved in that way.

Q4. [14140] **Mr. Pickthall:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the further education sector has been treated appallingly over the past 18 years, having been subjected by the previous Government to alternating periods of neglect, especially in terms of funding, and harassment? Is it not still the Cinderella service of our education system, when it should be regarded as its linchpin? Will he tell the House what the Government are going to do to correct that?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the dire financial situation that further education colleges were left in by the previous Government's policies. I am delighted, therefore, that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment today announced a major new boost for further education. An extra £83 million in new funding will be made available next year, and colleges will also be able to bid for more than £100 million new deal money for education and training. That is new money, which would never have been put in by the previous Government.

Q5. [14141] **Mr. Bob Russell:** Has the Labour party received any benefits from Mr. Ecclestone's donation of £1 million before the election? Was that money used to reduce an overdraft on deposit? What has happened to the interest?

The Prime Minister: The money was spent as part of the general election campaign, as the hon. Gentleman would expect. The Labour party has published the names of donors this year and will publish them again next year. Neither of the other two main parties does that.

Mr. Skinner: When my right hon. Friend sets up the committee to look into the question of money from outsiders and into the cap on national expenditure in general election campaigns, will he bear in mind that the cap for constituencies equates to about £6 million for a party contesting 650 seats? If we also had a national cap of about £6 million, there would not be many pollsters from the Tory party knocking about and there would not be many advertisements in the newspapers, but it would be a level playing field. That would enable us to escape from what has happened in the United States of America, where the problem can no longer be handled because that kind of sleaze has gone too far.

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether this will do more damage to me or to my hon. Friend, but I must admit that I agree with the broad outline of what he says. We have fought general elections—*[Interruption.]* It is all very well for Conservative Members to shout, but we have had to fight elections in which there was direct mail without limit—they sent out literally millions of letters—advertising hoardings and advertising in newspapers, and in which vast expense was incurred. We have never been told how a penny of it was raised. We want the same rules—a level playing field—for everybody.

Dartington (Visit)

Q6. [14142] **Mr. Steen:** If he will make an official visit to Dartington in the Totnes constituency.

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to visit the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but I intend to visit all regions of the country.

Mr. Steen: Since Dartington and the Totnes area of south Devon is a mecca for alternative therapies, and given the increase in the number of people now benefiting from complementary medicines—many Members of Parliament have experienced those benefits and some need the experience even more—will the Prime Minister endorse the view of the King's Fund, supported by Prince Charles? Leading physicians and those involved in complementary medicines are seeking a solution whereby their approach to medicine can go into mainstream medicine.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. My hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health will meet the Prince of Wales next week to discuss the recommendations of the integrated health care document. We are, of course, considering the issue carefully. In addition, Department of Health officials will arrange meetings with its main authors. As the hon. Gentleman is aware, doctors and clinicians in the national health service are free to arrange for their patients to receive complementary medicine if there is a clinical need for it. It is a growing area, which is now supported by as many within the national health service as outside it.

Engagements

Q7. [14143] **Jacqui Smith:** I welcome the Chancellor's announcement of an extra £300 million for health services this winter and my right hon. Friend's comments today. When will we know how much of that money will be available for the Worcestershire area? In the light of local concerns about health authority reviews, can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that extra money made available by this Government will be targeted directly on patient care and not used to prop up the inefficiencies of the previous Government's internal market?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that her local health authority in Worcestershire is receiving an extra £1.5 million, which will go directly into improving patient care this winter. That is part of £300 million more than the Conservative Government were willing to give the national health service.

That is not all we are doing for the national health service. As a result of getting rid of the discredited Conservative internal market, a further £100 million has already been saved for the health service. That is extra money going not into bureaucrats, but into patient care

Mr. Brady: Given the importance that the Neill committee has attached to the Government being seen to behave properly, not merely behaving properly, will the Prime Minister undertake to publish the minutes of the meeting that he had with Mr. Ecclestone on 16 October?

The Prime Minister: What we have done was set out clearly in reply to an earlier question. There was never

any favour, sought or given. The decision is the right decision, taken for the right reasons. If the hon. Gentleman is asking about the Neill committee, he might ask why his own party, despite the promise of its leader four months ago, has still not published any information about its own donations.

Q8. [14144] **Dr. Tony Wright:** Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, when the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life was established—as long ago as 1995—he, on behalf of the Labour party, pressed immediately for the issue of party funding to be referred to that committee, but the Conservative Government refused to make that referral because they were terrified about what it would reveal? Taking up the points raised on both sides of the House, does he accept that there is an anomaly between the restriction on party spending at constituency level and the lack of restriction at national level? As a matter of principle, is it not the case that, the cheaper our politics becomes, the cleaner it will become?

The Prime Minister: I agree entirely with the sentiments that my hon. Friend has just expressed. We did ask for the Nolan committee, as it then was, to be able to look at party funding. I raised the matter several times when I was Leader of the Opposition; I was refused every time. The Conservatives have still not disclosed the names of the people who funded the last election campaign for them. When will they disclose that information, as they promised some months ago?

Mr. Martin Bell: Does the Prime Minister agree that the perception of wrong-doing can be as damaging to public confidence as the wrong-doing itself? Have we slain one dragon only to have another take its place, with a red rose in its mouth?

The Prime Minister: That is precisely why we sought the advice of Sir Patrick Neill. He gave that advice. We followed it to the letter. When Sir Patrick Neill reports, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in making sure that we can get the proper restrictions on party donations for all political parties, including, for the first time, the Conservative party.

Q9. [14145] **Mr. Pearson:** Is my right hon. Friend aware that a relatively obscure Australian called Rolf Harris caused gridlock in my constituency at the weekend because the hugely popular Merry Hill shopping centre has massive traffic problems, which the previous Government did nothing about? Will he ensure that the Government's new integrated transport policy improves rail access and relieves local congestion so that we can have the balanced transport system that the people of the west midlands want?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is precisely why we will publish a paper on the subject shortly. I know that it will provide great assistance to his constituents and to others throughout the country.

Q10. [14146] **Mr. Prior:** I return the Prime Minister to his meeting on 16 October. Why did he not refer the result of that meeting to the Nolan committee as soon he could?

The Prime Minister: I shall reply directly: it is for the exact reason that I gave earlier. No decisions were made on 16 October. At that point in time, a number of different options were under discussion. For example, one of those options was that the national principle of subsidiarity should apply, so there would be a broad directive and then national legislation. Another option was that there should be a derogation for a long period, with a review break for all sport. It was only at the beginning of last week that the specific exemption for formula one was decided upon. The moment that happened, we took action.

Q11. [14147] **Mr. Todd:** Might I change the subject and ask my right hon. Friend whether he is aware that I recently visited Southern Derbyshire health authority to discuss preparations for the winter crisis in health and the appalling state of the health service in my area? Will he tell the House how much Southern Derbyshire health authority has been allocated from the £300 million that has been set aside? *[Laughter.]*

The Prime Minister: Conservative Members may laugh, but getting more money into the health service is precisely what this country wants—and we are delivering it. One of the reasons the people turned the Tories out at the election is the damage they did to the national health service. At long last the people again have a Government who believe in the national health service.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath:

Douglas Garven Alexander Esq., for Paisley, South *[Interruption.]*

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. In all my time in this place, I have never heard such rudeness when a new Member from any party has arrived at the House to take his or her seat and to do a job on behalf of his or her constituents. It is appalling to hear such barracking of a new Member of Parliament who has just taken his seat. I would be grateful if you would comment on that.

Madam Speaker: I think that the hon. Lady's point is well taken by the House and by me. I, too, have never heard such jeering when a new Member has been brought into the House. I told the hon. Member, when he took his seat, that I hoped that he would not join those who have made such noise today.

Representation of the People (Amendment)

3.34 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to extend electoral registration for homeless persons.

Within a nation, or any other political system, the right to vote is the fundamental building block of democracy. By itself it does not guarantee democratic arrangements, but given free, competitive political parties and competing individual candidates, it is the basis on which the rights of individuals and group interests are based.

When the mass franchise grew in Britain, from 1867, it was part of the dynamic that led us on to free education, old-age pensions and the high water mark of the welfare state. We tend to assume that the issues of the franchise were sorted out satisfactorily years ago. Apart from convicted persons in penal institutions; those who are seriously mentally impaired; residents from overseas—other than those from the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland—and peers in parliamentary elections, we assume that everyone else over 18 is catered for.

That is not so. Millions are missing from electoral registers; most disabled people cannot even get into polling stations; and homeless people face not only practical difficulties in registering to vote, but a major legal impediment.

Ever since we got rid of property and financial qualifications for voting, in 1918, we have insisted that a person has to be a "resident" to qualify for a vote. A resident needs a residence, and a homeless person, by definition, cannot meet that qualification. Those who qualify to vote are those who are held to have a permanent residence on the qualifying date for electoral registration.

I therefore propose some simple changes in the law, to allow for the registration of homeless people. First, if a homeless person takes temporary occupation of residential accommodation for homeless persons on the qualifying date, that would count. That would cover Salvation Army hostels and their equivalent.

Secondly, a "declaration of locality" properly made and attested to would also qualify a homeless person for registration. It would state the address or place where the person stays, or with which he or she is most closely connected. Homeless people can often be found in particular areas where they sleep rough.

Although the registration changes that I have in mind would work best with a proactive response from the Home Office and from electoral registration officers, organisations for homeless people would also play a key role in encouraging registration. These include *The Big Issue*, which operates not just in London but in many other cities; the National Homeless Alliance, which, in 1995, as CHAR, the housing campaign for single homeless people, produced an invaluable survey entitled "No Home, No Vote, No Voice"—its work shaped my proposed Bill—and Streetlife. Streetlife, the National Homeless Alliance and others have been involved in activities in support of my Bill earlier today outside the House.

Most localities have groups that work with the homeless. These would also act as recruiting agents for registration. Electoral returning officers would tend to be

keen to act in line with the measures that I propose, as their association—the Association of Electoral Administrators—seeks to remove barriers to registration, including the removal of difficulties for people without permanent or conventional residential qualifications.

If someone asked me why we should bother about the rights of homeless people, I would feel sorry for the questioner. Homelessness is a major problem, which has grown with the free market and the attacks in the past 18 years on the welfare state and social housing. The homeless are our fellow citizens, who should be entitled, enabled and encouraged to vote, and to stand for elected bodies. The vote gives a voice, and if the voice of the homeless is not heard, the rest of us are less likely to respond to their concerns.

Ultimately, the vote is part of the process whereby the homeless themselves can set the wheels in motion to help to overcome their homeless status. If we think that that is a wild ideal—when it involves the benefits of democratic participation—we have no right to be in this place.

I hope that the Home Office will respond favourably to my Bill. I am bringing it to the attention of my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), in his capacity as Minister without Portfolio, as it is clearly an issue of social exclusion relevant to the unit about which he told us in his Fabian speech.

If the House gives me permission to bring in the Bill, hon. Members will discover that it was brought in by two Conservative Members, two Liberal Democrats, the leader of Plaid Cymru, the deputy leader of the Scottish National party, the only independent Member of Parliament and Labour Members representing Scotland, Wales and England. Only Northern Ireland Members are missing—but they come part of the way with me in a report published by the Northern Ireland Forum, where I gave evidence to an electoral body interested in electoral matters.

The members of that body said that they supported the measure as far as temporary accommodation was concerned—Salvation Army units and their equivalents—but they felt some anxiety, which I consider unfounded, about electoral fraud. That is a big problem in Northern Ireland, in comparison to what happens in other areas. I therefore propose initially that the Bill should apply to Britain; subsequently, Northern Ireland's specific considerations would need to be tackled.

I believe that hon. Members in all parties support the Bill, and I hope that the House will give me leave to introduce it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Harry Barnes, Mr. Richard Shepherd, Mr. Peter Bottomley, Mr. Nigel Jones, Mr. Paul Burstow, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. Martin Bell, Mr. Tam Dalyell and Mr. Paul Flynn.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Harry Barnes accordingly presented a Bill to extend electoral registration for homeless persons: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 16 January, and to be printed [Bill 81].

Orders of the Day

European Communities (Amendment) Bill

[Relevant documents: The Minutes of Evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday 4th November (HC305-i) .]

Order for Second Reading read.

3.42 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I invite the House to approve the Bill that puts the Amsterdam treaty into legislation with pride. I am proud that we achieved a good deal for Britain, and confident that any open-minded Member will support the Bill and the treaty. I confess that there are probably not many such Members in the House, but I am encouraged by the fact that the Bill and the treaty constitute such a good deal for Britain that I can attempt to persuade even Conservative Members to rise above their prejudices and support it—despite whatever dark suspicions they may have that Amsterdam is in Europe, and probably full of Europeans.

Let us start that attempt by appealing to Conservative Members on the basis of two major gains in Britain's national interests, which even Conservatives must surely applaud.

First, the Amsterdam treaty provides a secure legal basis for Britain to retain its frontier controls—a legal basis that is watertight beyond legal challenge to the European Court of Justice; a legal basis that is without time limit as long as Britain chooses to retain it. It recognises that, because Britain is an island, it is sensible for us to retain controls at the point of entry, and that, because of our long historical and cultural ties with other parts of the world, it is important to retain control of our own immigration policy. Policy on border controls and immigration will be made in Britain, not in Brussels.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: So soon? Of course.

Mr. Howard: Does the Foreign Secretary recognise that that deal was done before the election, at the Foreign Affairs Council in March?

Mr. Cook: I have heard the right hon. and learned Gentleman assert that before. We have scoured the cupboards of the Home Office and the Foreign Office, but no such deal was anywhere to be found in any of the many draft treaties that we inherited. If he had made that deal, he should have explained it to the other members of the European Union, so that it would not have been necessary for us to continue until 4 o'clock in the morning to get the package. There was certainly nothing in the text about immigration or border controls when we took it over, but there is certainly something of the night about this treaty.

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does my right hon. Friend have any confirmation that the

[Mrs. Louise Ellman]

statements made by the right hon. and learned Gentleman and by the Leader of the Opposition that they would call for a referendum on the treaty of Amsterdam will lead to an amendment being tabled? If my right hon. Friend has no information on that, would he care to ask the right hon. and learned Gentleman if that is the case?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. and learned Gentleman will make his speech in his own good time. It is certainly true that he was loud in his demands throughout the summer for a referendum. Indeed, he was demanding a referendum as late as the Conservative party conference on 8 October. He may have read with interest, as I did, in *The Daily Telegraph* only five days later that his leader had decided quietly to ditch the commitment to a referendum. I can only conclude that the Conservative party is now so weary of being defeated in elections and referendums that it has decided to draw a line under them.

I have shown that we have retained our control over borders and frontiers. There is another national gain that I hope Conservative Members will recognise. We have prevented attempts to subordinate the Western European Union as a defence arm of the European Commission within the European Union. We have reasserted—it is explicitly stated in the treaty—that the defence of western Europe and of Britain will continue to be through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, not through the European Union. The European Union will not now be a defence organisation.

We have shown in the treaty that it is entirely possible to co-operate with our European partners and to work with them on the prosperity of our economy, on the health of our environment and on the safety against drugs on our streets, without compromising our national identity. I hope, therefore, that the delicate souls in the Press Gallery will not be frightened by Conservative Europhobes parading the ghouls and beasties of federalism that lurk only in the recesses of their subconscious.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Having said that, does my right hon. Friend think that it is at least wise to talk to the French before there is any question of endorsing military action against Iraq?

Mr. Cook: I am not entirely sure that that intervention naturally arose from the passage in my speech. However, I assure my hon. Friend that we discussed that matter and many others with the French at last week's very successful Anglo-French summit. The French were wholly in agreement with our position. At this time, it is most important for the United Nations, particularly the five permanent members of the Security Council, which includes Britain and France, to send a united message to Saddam Hussein that he must observe the terms of the United Nations Security Council resolutions.

I was about to remind the shadow Foreign Secretary that, early in the summer, he predicted that the agenda for Amsterdam was so far-reaching that it would call into question our survival as a nation state. Even making generous allowance for the hyperbole that is appropriate to a leadership race, I have to say that that statement is so far out of touch with the reality of the Bill that it qualifies him to be out of orbit from this planet.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): May I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to provision F.1 of the treaty, which allows, as he will be aware, for a majority of states, if they deem any state to be guilty of a persistent breach of human rights, to withdraw all voting rights from that state? Will he guarantee that, if, against all our hopes, peace breaks down in Northern Ireland, the situation in Ulster could not be used as an excuse by other European Union members to deny Britain full voting rights?

Mr. Cook: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on making the shadow Foreign Secretary appear to be in touch with reality.

First, the hon. Gentleman is wrong. It is not a majority of states: it is unanimity minus the one state that is under question. Secondly, that provision refers to persistent and serious violations of democracy and of human rights. I give him an undertaking that, so long as the Labour party is in power, it will not be possible to find 14 EU states that will agree that the Government are in serious and persistent violation of democracy or of human rights. If it is lurking in the minds of Conservative Members that their Government may be guilty of persistent and serious violations of human rights, I advise them to disclose that in their manifesto at the next election.

Those interventions reveal more about the invincible prejudice of Conservative Members and of those on their Front Bench—or at any rate those who have not yet resigned from their Front Bench—than they tell us about the treaty.

Border controls and territorial defence are two of the key attributes of the nation state. In relation to both, Britain emerges strengthened by the treaty to pursue our preferred national policy. For good measure, the treaty redresses the balance in favour of the nation state rather than of Brussels. There is a lengthy protocol on subsidiarity in the treaty. It provides that Community action can be justified only where its objective cannot be met by national action by member states.

The new Labour Government attach as much importance to subsidiarity as the Conservative Government ever did. Where we differ is that we believe that subsidiarity does not stop with the transfer of powers from Brussels to Whitehall. We are also prepared to practise subsidiarity at home, not just to preach it abroad; and, in the treaty, we have succeeded in achieving a good, legal and justiciable basis for the subsidiarity principle.

I should have thought that those were gains that Conservative Members would want. In a rational world, when the Division bell rang at 10 o'clock, they would vote to welcome the Bill, not to oppose it. I am told that they cannot do that, because the Bill brings Britain into the social chapter. That is right, and we are proud of it.

We have ended the insult to the British people that they are fit only for the worst rights at work in the whole of Europe. We have ended it, because we understand the modern world. We understand that we will never be competitive on the back of badly paid, poorly treated and badly motivated staff. The key to success is a skilled and committed work force showing initiative at the workplace.

The social chapter, which gives the work force the chance to share ownership in the company strategy, is a step towards that more competitive work force, and a committed partnership between management and staff, who help to make an enterprise succeed.

Of course we have signed up to the social chapter. We now have a seat at the table when it is discussed. Indeed, it is not just the Government of Britain who have a seat at the table when it is discussed. Because we have opted in, the Confederation of British Industry now has a seat when European employers discuss the social chapter.

I know that Opposition Members have problems with the CBI at the moment. After all, their leader dismissed as lemmings the great majority of CBI members who disagreed with the Conservative line on Europe. However, for the record, this summer the CBI got its first vote on the social chapter. It voted for the new directive on rights for part-time workers. I hope that, before Opposition Members vote down the Bill on the pretext that it brings in the social chapter and that they would be saving industry from the directives under the social chapter, they will note that, on the one vote so far, industry has voted in favour of the directive.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): In that case, will the Foreign Secretary explain why the latest edition of the CBI's *Business Update* states:

"The government has stated that it shares our reservations"

about works councils

"but it can be overruled since this is one aspect of Social Chapter legislation which can be covered by QMV"?

Mr. Cook: For the hon. Gentleman's guidance, the current directive on the works councils has been rejected by the social partners, and the Commission has invited the social partners to negotiate. Only then will the Commission bring forward a proposal. When it does, we shall take our seat and make sure that the directive is amended in ways that reflect our thinking. We have already—because we have a seat—successfully amended the directive on the burden of proof, to make it wholly consistent with the existing state of British law.

If the shadow Foreign Secretary plans to found his entire vote tonight on the social chapter, I invite him to answer one question. During the general election, the former Prime Minister predicted that, if we joined the social chapter, Britain would have 500,000 more unemployed. In the first weekend after the general election, we said that we would join the social chapter, and my hon. Friend the Minister of State went to Brussels to say so on the Monday after polling day. In the six months since we stated that intention, unemployment has fallen by 190,000.

I invite the shadow Foreign Secretary to name one person who has lost his job through our intention to join the social chapter. *[Interruption.]* If the right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot answer that question, I can. The only people who have lost their jobs through the social chapter are Tory Members who fought the election telling the people of Britain that what was good enough for the rest of Europe was too good for the people of Britain.

The Opposition must now recognise that, in any case, there is no danger of a flood of prescriptive, unrealistic regulations from Europe. There is a changed tone in Europe. Opposition Members could hear it if they did not always turn a deaf ear to the channel. They can see it in the employment chapter in the treaty. As a result of lobbying by the new Labour Government, that employment chapter now opens with the recognition that the key to employment is the promotion of

"a skilled, trained and adaptable work force and labour markets responsive to economic change".

For the first time, the treaty recognises that employment and growth result from the flexibility that comes from skills, not the inflexibility that comes from over-regulation. For the first time also, the treaty calls upon the European Union to achieve a high level of employment.

When Opposition Members negotiated Maastricht, they wrote into the treaty of union a list of hard, precise financial and monetary targets. Those targets are now balanced by a commitment on the part of the European Union to achieve the objective of high employment. The employment chapter puts a duty on community institutions to take into account the objective of promoting employment when they formulate any community policy or programme. That is another provision where the Bill improves the European Union. There are many more.

I invite the shadow Foreign Secretary to point out which of those improvements threaten the survival of Britain as a nation. Is it the provision for better scrutiny of European legislation by national Parliaments? Because of the changes in the treaty of Amsterdam, the Commission is now required to produce every draft directive in all the languages of the Union six weeks before it is put on the Council's agenda. The requirement deals with one of the Scrutiny Committee's main complaints throughout the previous Parliament, when its members could not get an English text.

After a directive goes before the Council, any citizen will have a right to the documents and minutes of the Council's decisions and votes, ending the entirely unsatisfactory situation in which the Council of Ministers was the only legislature in Europe that met in secret.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): The right hon. Gentleman asked what in the treaty should concern ordinary people who usually are not actively interested in politics. Will he comment on article 13—formerly known as article 6a—which is of concern to many religious groups? Religious groups representing 1 million members have written to the Prime Minister about the article, which outlaws discrimination.

There is great concern that some schools—such as Anglican and Catholic schools—that currently can insist on being run by a practising member of their denomination, may be banned from doing so by the article. Reassurances—for example, on a unanimity requirement—have been given. In the Grimaldi case, however, the European Court of Justice extended the law. Will the Foreign Secretary reassure all those groups that the Government are aware of the article, and take those worries seriously?

Mr. Cook: We take very seriously any worries that people might have that religious schools will be struck by any part of European legislation. However, the Bill and the treaty of Amsterdam do not do that. The treaty provides the basis for the Commission and the Council to

[Mr. Cook]

legislate on grounds of discrimination wider than simply gender discrimination. It is, however, only an enabling clause; it is not itself a directive or a binding law.

The Council and the Commission would have to make proposals to put into effect any new measure against discrimination. In those debates and in that Council meeting, Britain would have a full voice, as would the many countries of the European Union that have religious schools. Therefore, that anxiety is entirely unfounded, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to reassure his constituents.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: No; I must press on. I have been generous in giving way, and I will give way again shortly.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh) has pointed out one of the treaty's other improvements: it provides for legislation against discrimination on a Europewide basis. Britain has one of the largest groups of ethnic minorities anywhere in Europe. It is therefore particularly in our national interest to ensure that members of those ethnic minorities should be protected against discrimination when they exercise their rights under the treaty to travel or to work on the continent.

As some hon. Members will know, disability groups within Britain lobbied very hard to obtain that provision. As a result of British lobbying, a specific declaration is attached to the treaty requiring the Community's institutions to take account in any directive of the needs of the disabled, thereby opening the door for them to meaningful consultation.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): I am absolutely astounded by what the right hon. Gentleman said immediately before he answered the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh). It seemed that he was claiming credit for having brought to an end the really quite scandalous situation in which the Council of Ministers is the only closed legislature in the world. He said that, now that the votes will be published, that will no longer be the case. He knows perfectly well that the problem will not be addressed at all by publishing votes, because votes are very rarely taken.

The legislative sessions of the Council of Ministers should be open to the public, and the television cameras should be there—so that the arguments that are adduced can be followed by the public, the changes of position by national representatives can be followed by their electorates, and the deals that are done can be seen through. The Council of Ministers remains closed. Moreover, the right hon. Gentleman's Government, with France, have opposed opening the legislative function of the Council of Ministers. It is disingenuous of him to suggest otherwise.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman in his last point is absolutely wide of the mark. We were pressing throughout the Amsterdam summit for the widest possible opening. I treat the hon. Gentleman with some respect, because he has shown courage and independence of mind on this matter, but if his complaint about this treaty is that it does not go quite far enough in openness, I cannot quite understand why he will fail to vote for it, given that it offers an awful lot more openness than there is at present.

I should like to press on to other areas of improvement.

Mr. Davies: What about the social chapter?

Mr. Cook: We have dealt with the social chapter. I fully understand the pressures applied to the hon. Gentleman, and I will not hold it against him if he votes against the Government tonight. He knows perfectly well that, if the social chapter were the only thing holding together Opposition Members, they could have let the Bill pass, and dealt with that matter perfectly adequately in Committee had they wanted to do so.

There are other improvements of which I understood Opposition Members were in favour. There is a new protocol on animal welfare which defines animals as sentient beings rather than agricultural products. That change has enormous support among animal welfare organisations throughout Britain.

There is another change that improves the Union. The treaty commits the Union to sustainable development, and insists that protection of the environment must be integrated into the formulation of all Community policies. That is a welcome step forward, given the threat to the environment that has sometimes occurred in the past from Community policies, including agricultural policy.

If none of those improvements persuades Opposition Members, if none is welcome on the Opposition Benches, surely there would be a welcome for the provision in the treaty for tougher powers on fraud. The provision empowers the Council to take the necessary measures against any member state that fails to counter fraud against the European Community just as they would fraud against their national budget. The people of Britain want their money used effectively; the people of Britain want Europe to crack down on fraud, and the treaty enables us to do that.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Cook: I cannot resist giving way to the hon. Gentleman, but if he will let me, I shall proceed a little further, and then give way.

I can understand why, against all those improvements, the Leader of the Opposition decided that a referendum may not be a great idea. It would be difficult for Conservative Members to campaign against such a collection of improvements to the European Union. I can also understand the right hon. Gentleman's reservation about having a referendum, because, although he may be able to coax all his party into the Lobby tonight, he of course has no idea which side they would support in a referendum when the Whips were safely out of earshot.

Only a month ago, Norman Lamont praised the Leader of the Opposition's latest decision on the single currency, saying:

"It has already created a more united party."

Sadly, Mr. Lamont may be a little out of touch, since he is no longer with us in the House, because history has dealt unkindly with that prediction. One month later, there have been so many expressions of dissent on the

Conservative Benches that the hon. Member for Leominster (Mr. Temple-Morris) got headlines for the unusual news story that he was a Tory who was not resigning.

The Tory party has been too busy having its own referendum to have a referendum for the real people of Britain. If it consults the real people of Britain, it will find that the provisions in the treaty that I have outlined are welcome throughout the whole of Britain—except in the Tory party.

I understand, though, that the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), has one last criticism of the treaty with which I have yet to deal: the treaty extends qualified majority voting. Yes, it does. It extends QMV precisely to 15 areas. That is exactly half the number of areas to which the Maastricht treaty extended QMV during a period in which the right hon. and learned Gentleman sat throughout in the Cabinet.

Moreover, both the Maastricht treaty and this treaty are as nothing in their extension of QMV as the truly massive extension of QMV from the Single European Act 1986.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) was in the Government all the time.

Mr. Cook: And voted for it.

Having swallowed whole those two banquets of extensions of qualified majority voting, it is humbug to gag on the bite-sized extensions in the treaty.

In any case, those extensions are sensible. We have talked about the new powers on fraud. They have to operate on qualified majority voting. If they did not, any member state that was being penalised would have a veto. Is that what the shadow Foreign Secretary wants? Does he want countries that milk the budget to have a veto on action against them?

Of course the new provisions on transparency are triggered by qualified majority voting. Otherwise, those countries that wanted to keep a cloak of secrecy could do so by retaining a veto. Is that what the shadow Foreign Secretary wants? Does he not recognise that it is in our interests to ensure that a member state that wants to keep secret something that it does not want to do in public should not be allowed to do so?

Mr. Cash: Will the Foreign Secretary take note of the fact that Mr. Joe Carey, an eminent member of the Court of Auditors, has written an important paper on the way to improve methods of dealing with fraud in the community? In the previous Parliament, there were exchanges on the role of the Public Accounts Committee. The suggestion was made that we should insist on other member states applying the same criteria for determining fraud as we use in our Public Accounts Committee. That would establish a proper network of control over fraud. Is that the Government's intention? Are they pressing for such measures?

Mr. Cook: We could not get agreement on applying the British standard in other countries. However, the treaty says that every country has to apply to European spending the same standards and tests that it applies to its domestic spending. We must apply the system we use for our national budget to European spending in Britain. The same steps must be taken in every other European state.

There are sensible, practical reasons for the extensions of qualified majority voting in the treaty. However, there is one other, larger reason—the enlargement of the Union. Within the next decade or so, it is possible that the European Union will have not just 15 members, but 26 members. The Council of Ministers will face paralysis if even a decision on the award of a research contract has to be passed by unanimity, with each of the 26 countries clutching a veto, as the Conservatives apparently want.

The rest of Europe is queuing up to get into the European Union. There are a dozen applicant countries. They want in because they recognise, as the Opposition apparently do not, that membership of the European Union could give them greater prosperity through more trade, greater security through political co-operation with their neighbours, and greater clout in international negotiations than they could have by themselves. The European Union's historic mission is to open its doors and embrace the new democracies of central and eastern Europe.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Many of the aspects of the treaty that the right hon. Gentleman calls advantages are undoubtedly advantages. We were negotiating them when we were in government. The sin of omission in the treaty is the one that he has just put his finger on—its failure to anticipate enlargement. The deficiency in his negotiating position is that, when agreeing to the social chapter, he did not demand a trade-off that the treaty would contain the institutional changes that could have hastened enlargement to the east.

Mr. Cook: We signed up to the social chapter not to be nice to the rest of Europe, but because we believe that it is in the interests of the people of Britain. Of course, the hon. Gentleman is right about the reform of institutions on one level. Changes will be necessary before enlargement. Some of them will be tough changes. Applicant countries will need to make changes to their economies, and there will have to be changes in the European Union.

One essential change is a rebalancing of the votes in the Council of Europe to protect the larger countries from being out-voted by a growing number of smaller countries. I am pleased to say that we have had it explicitly written into the treaty that that issue of the rebalancing of the votes in the Council of Ministers must be addressed before any further enlargement takes place.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex) *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I am sorry, but I will not give way. I have been generous so far, and I must at some stage allow the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) to make his speech.

One of the great gains of reaching agreement at Amsterdam is that that has cleared the way forward for enlargement. The provision, as hon. Members will know, is that negotiations on enlargement were timed to start six months after the completion of the intergovernmental conference at Amsterdam. If we failed to reach agreement at Amsterdam, it would still be ahead of us at the coming Luxembourg summit. That would have meant that

[Mr. Cook]

enlargement negotiations could have started only in the latter half of next year. As it is, they will now start during the British presidency.

As a nation, we have a golden opportunity to show the other member states of the European Union that Britain can set a direction for Europe, and we have an opportunity to prove to the applicant countries that they have a reliable ally in Britain. None of that would have been possible if we had failed at Amsterdam.

Mr. Jenkin *rose—*

Sir Teddy Taylor *rose—*

Mr. Cook: I have given way for the last time.

We did not fail at Amsterdam—we succeeded, because the Government have transformed Britain's relations with our European partners. Britain is now respected as a constructive partner with which the other countries of Europe can do serious business. It is no longer resented as a persistent opponent which sabotages the business of Europe. Because of that, we got a better deal for Britain than the Conservatives ever could have achieved.

We went to Amsterdam determined to put border controls for Britain on a secure legal foundation. We came back with that agreement. We went to Amsterdam determined to retain a veto on defence and foreign policy and to preserve NATO as the cornerstone of Britain's defence. We came back with that agreement. We went to Amsterdam determined to extend to the British people the same rights at work that are enjoyed by the other peoples of Europe. We came back with that agreement.

We went to Amsterdam determined to put jobs at the top of the agenda of Europe and to bring in an employment chapter that recognises the importance of employability and adaptability. We came back with that agreement. We went to Amsterdam determined to make Europe more accessible and transparent to its citizens, and more committed to protecting those citizens from unemployment, an unhealthy environment and discrimination. We came back with that agreement. Finally, we went to Amsterdam determined to obtain agreement on tougher powers to deal with fraud against the Union—a fraud that cheats the citizens of the Union. We came back with that agreement, also.

More important than any one of those gains—important though they are—is the fact that we demonstrated that Britain is back where it belongs, in the main stream of Europe, and therefore able to negotiate a deal that is better for the people of Britain and better also for the people of Europe. That is the basis on which I commend the Bill to the House. I ask all hon. Members from all parties who want to keep Britain a leading partner in Europe to join us in the Lobby tonight to vote for a Bill that will be good for Europe, and good for Britain.

4.18 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): Today, the House has the opportunity to assess the action taken by the Government at Amsterdam on behalf of the British people and to judge whether the Government's rhetoric after the summit matched the action taken at it. Above all, we have the opportunity to vote on the Amsterdam treaty. We should judge that treaty in the light of the challenges facing our nation. We should judge it on its impact on British competitiveness and British jobs, and on its consequences for the people of eastern and central Europe who yearn to join the European Union. We should measure the skill of those ace negotiators on the Government Front Bench by the way in which they protected and enhanced British interests.

On each of those criteria, Labour's performance at Amsterdam was lamentable. The truth is that Labour failed. Of course, one would never get that impression from Ministers' words. The Foreign Secretary returned from the summit claiming a negotiating triumph. But then, he also claimed that his recent tour of India was a great success.

The right hon. Gentleman's first six months as Foreign Secretary have been utterly disastrous. From Washington to Islamabad and from Jakarta to Delhi he has put his foot in it—and his long-suffering officials have been left to pick up the pieces.

The right hon. Gentleman is not the first Labour Foreign Secretary to act in that way. When one of his predecessors upset a distinguished foreign guest, his officials were asked for an explanation. "The trouble with the Foreign Secretary," they replied, "is that he is not very good with foreigners."

At least the current Foreign Secretary appears to recognise his own shortcomings. Eager to avoid another diplomatic incident in a sensitive area, he has, I understand, recently cancelled his planned trip to the middle east. The sad reality is that the best contribution that he can make to peace in that region, or indeed in any region, is to stay well away.

It must be especially galling for the Foreign Secretary that his task today, on his first important appearance at the Dispatch Box since taking office, is to defend the Amsterdam treaty—a treaty designed to deepen the European Union, not to widen it. After all, it was he who said that the European Union would succeed only if

"it can jettison the dead ballast of the efforts at integration which offend national interest".

At least the right hon. Gentleman appears—not in his speech today, but elsewhere, last week—to have grasped the fact that what his Government signed up to at Amsterdam is not quite the brilliant deal that they originally thought it. Last week he was forced to admit to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs that there had been a "misunderstanding" in the early hours of 18 June. That, he explained, was why he had failed to challenge a late amendment by the Spanish Prime Minister that handed Spain a powerful bargaining chip on Gibraltar.

Of course, the Foreign Secretary was quick to make it clear that that was not his fault, and assured us that he had not, as some had suspected, nodded off during the negotiations.

"This was one of the areas",

he said,

"where I have to say that our satisfaction with the note-keeping of the Presidency was not as much as we would have wished it would be".

The right hon. Gentleman did not tell the Select Committee how he proposed to remedy the deficiency. Will the Prime Minister bring a tape recorder to any future discussions that he has with his European colleagues,

or will he insist that note-taking at such meetings be added to the responsibilities of the Minister without Portfolio? What is clear is that the Foreign Secretary cannot be trusted either to raise such points at the right time, or even to take a proper note of them.

The point at issue was not an esoteric detail but one of the many so-called triumphs on which the Prime Minister preened himself when he reported back to the House on the outcome of the Amsterdam summit. It relates to the sensitive area of asylum and immigration.

This is what the Prime Minister said about those subjects to the House on 18 June:

"We have no obligation to be in that at all; but what we have secured, which is important and a better way of going about things, is what I call an opt-in. We have the power within the treaty to go into any of these areas if we want to. If we do not want to, we need not, but if we do, no other country can block us going in."—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 319.]

Strong words—but the Prime Minister was wrong.

As the Foreign Secretary told the Select Committee last Tuesday, each of the other member states will have a veto over a future opt-in. Any one of them can "block us going in". If at any time Britain wanted to opt in, in whole or in part, to those arrangements, Spain, for example, could block us unless we were prepared to make concessions on Gibraltar.

When will the Prime Minister apologise for his and the Foreign Secretary's negligence, and for giving the House a thoroughly misleading account of the outcome?

Mr. Robin Cook: As I understood the right hon. and learned Gentleman's complaint, it was that we agreed to too much qualified majority voting. He now seems to be complaining because there is provision for a veto in the Bill. If he reads the evidence that I gave to the Select Committee, he will see that we secured a declaration of the whole Council, which clearly sets out that admission to the Schengen acquis will be on the basis of an opinion of the Commission, and that any member, including Spain or any other country, is obliged to use its best efforts for us to join.

There is no question of our making any concession over Gibraltar to obtain access. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman is making such a fuss, is he really suggesting that a future Conservative Government would want to accede to the articles of the Schengen acquis and thereby give up Britain's border controls?

Mr. Howard: I am dealing with the Prime Minister's claim. Is the Foreign Secretary suggesting that the declaration to which he referred, and by which he now apparently sets so much store, has any legal effect? The amendment that the Spanish Prime Minister secured is part of the treaty; it has binding legal effect. I suggest that the Foreign Secretary is cautious before he claims that the declaration has any legal effect to compare with that of an amendment to the treaty, which is what he failed to prevent.

Mr. Cook: The declaration is binding on all members. It is a declaration of the whole Council, to which the whole Council, including Spain, committed itself.

Mr. Howard: The Foreign Secretary did not answer the question, which is whether it is legally binding and has the same legal impact as an amendment to the treaty. If he does not appreciate the importance and significance of that distinction, he is not fit to hold his office. It is no good prattling on about whether it is binding. The question is: does it have the same legal effect as the amendment to the treaty that the right hon. Gentleman failed to prevent?

Mr. Cook: The right hon. and learned Gentleman must understand that any accession to Schengen will be a political judgment by the Council. The declaration is binding on all the members that made it, including Spain, which did not object to it.

Mr. Howard: We have the answer: it is not legally binding. The Foreign Secretary was free to confess to the Select Committee last week, and I do not know why he does not confess it to the House now, that, as he said, a misunderstanding took place; a mistake was made. The Spanish Prime Minister's amendment should have been blocked, but was not, as a result of the Foreign Secretary's negligence.

The Government have been quick to claim the credit for what is in fact an opt-out on border controls, even though they do not like to call it an opt-out, because when they were in opposition they said that they were against any permanent opt-outs. That opt-out was secured by the previous Government.

It is not necessary for the Foreign Secretary to scour the cabinets to find out about the opt-out. He need only look at the *Financial Times* of 12 February 1997, well before the general election. It states:

"After a decade of battling against pressure to open up the frontiers as part of the EU's single market, the UK now seems certain to be offered an 'opt-out' from a new treaty agreement which is expected to set 2001 as the target for banishing customs and police checks at national ports. Mr Michel Patijn, the minister for European affairs in the Netherlands, said it was now an accepted political fact that the UK's borders would not be given up in the interests of EU integration".

The deal was done before the general election. The Foreign Secretary had the task of putting it into the treaty to reflect the agreement that had been reached, and that is what he has done.

That was not the only make-believe triumph for which the Prime Minister claimed credit when he returned from Amsterdam. He said that real progress had been made on quota hopping. Before the general election, as Leader of the Opposition, he was keen to give the impression that there was no difference between his policy on quota hopping and the then Government's. He told the BBC's "The World at One":

"we certainly have not ruled out holding up IGC business in order to get the right changes to fishing policy in the British interest. . . . where Britain's interests are at stake we are perfectly prepared to be isolated. Of course we are."

Bold words, but when it came to the summit, the Prime Minister lacked the stomach for a fight.

Terrified of being isolated in Europe, the right hon. Gentleman was too frightened even to back the protocol for treaty change tabled by the previous Government. Instead, he settled for a worthless letter from the President of the Commission restating existing policy. Why? Because, in the Prime Minister's own words, the other member states did not support the proposed treaty

[Mr. Howard]

changes. So much for being prepared to hold up the intergovernmental conference. So much for being prepared to be isolated.

With that feeble attitude, the previous Government would never have negotiated Britain's opt-out from the single currency, never have won Britain a rebate and never have gained an opt-out from the social chapter. I hope that, at the end of the debate, the Minister of State will tell the House whether the letter from the President of the Commission has any legal authority, and exactly how the provisions set out in that letter differ from the previous arrangements on quota hopping.

The truth is that there has been no progress on quota hopping and, not surprisingly, British fishermen feel betrayed. What will be the attitude this evening of hon. Members on the Government and Liberal Democrat Benches who represent fishing constituencies? Can we expect any of them to stand up for their fishermen tonight and vote against the treaty? I suspect not. I hope that I am wrong, but if I am right, I hope that we shall not see those hon. Members getting up in future to complain that the right to fish in British waters is being lost to our industry and transferred to the fleets of other member states. Unless they vote against the Bill, those hon. Members will be letting down their fishermen and letting themselves down.

So the treaty is as bad for what it omits, as my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) pointed out, as for what it contains. The purpose of the IGC was, after all, to prepare for the enlargement of the European Union, a cause that Conservatives have long put at the top of the European agenda. Nowhere was the disappointment with the outcome of Amsterdam more keenly felt than in the countries of eastern and central Europe.

If the European ideal means anything, it must mean healing the divisions that have scarred our continent. Enlargement is the historic challenge of our generation. Most of the candidates for membership of the European Union come from the eastern part of our continent. They lived under the heel of a cruel tyranny for more than 50 years. They yearned for freedom throughout that period. They see membership of the European Union as setting the seal on that freedom. It is our duty to help them.

However, at Amsterdam, enlargement was sidelined for the sake of deeper integration. None of the reforms necessary for enlargement was tackled. There was no streamlining of European bureaucracy, no decentralisation of decision making, no pan-European liberalisation, no serious constitutional reform. If the European ideal means anything, surely it must mean bringing all the peoples of Europe together. That objective has not been advanced by this treaty.

The treaty contains provisions that are objectionable. Qualified majority voting has been extended to 15 new areas. By definition, that means that we can be forced to accept policies even when they are against Britain's interests.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman explain how his party imagines that the European Union can expand without gridlock unless qualified majority voting is extended?

Mr. Howard: If one takes the view that the only way forward for the European Union is to impose some rigid straitjacket of uniformity on every member state in every respect of the treaty provisions from Finland to Greece, the hon. Gentleman is right, but there is a different way forward, which does not require every member state to sign up to absolutely every aspect of every respect of the treaty. If that way forward is taken, it is not necessary to have more qualified majority voting in order for enlargement to take place.

Mr. Robin Cook: A moment ago, the right hon. and learned Gentleman was complaining about a veto for Spain; he is now objecting to the extension of qualified majority voting to the research budget. Has he not noticed that Spain is currently blocking and vetoing the research budget, unless it gets a guarantee for its structural funds? If he is so concerned about Spanish vetoes, why does not support us and take that veto away from Spain?

Mr. Howard: Because, as the right hon. Gentleman ought to know, we have used that veto on the research budget to good effect in the past. That is the way forward—to reach a consensus, even though that might take some time. He knows perfectly well that when I was talking earlier about his so-called opt-in, it was the Prime Minister's wrong, false and misleading claim that I was disputing, and it is about time we had an apology for that.

As powers are taken away from national Parliaments, they have been given to the European Parliament. Under the co-decision procedure, the European Parliament is put on almost the same footing as the Council of Ministers. It is given the power to veto proposals put forward by the Council of Ministers, and it is able to use that power to insist that those proposals reflect its views. The treaty extends co-decision to 23 new areas, including such important matters as social policy and transport policy.

The treaty also diminishes the freedom of member states to appoint Commissioners of their choice. In future, the European Parliament will have to approve the appointment of the President of the Commission; and the President of the Commission has been given a new power to veto the appointment of other Commissioners. What on earth was the justification for that change? It takes power away from democratically elected Governments and gives it to an unelected official in Brussels. Why did the Government agree to it? What benefits will that bring to Britain? I hope that the Minister of State will answer those questions when he winds up the debate.

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): How does the right hon. and learned Gentleman think proper accountability and scrutiny can take place without extending co-decision making to the European Parliament in areas where qualified majority voting applies in the Council of Ministers? Is he suggesting that qualified majority voting, which was greatly extended by the Government of which he was a member, should be abolished?

Mr. Howard: I thought that I had made it clear that I am not in favour of extending qualified majority voting in the treaty, or of extending the co-decision procedure. Accountability comes via national Parliaments, which hold their Governments to account for the way in which they cast their votes in the Council of Ministers. That is proper democratic accountability.

Mr. Dalyell: Forgive me, but I am just a little puzzled about all this. Am I wrong in thinking that the

Conservative Members of the European Parliament have expressed themselves in favour of all the things that the right hon. and learned Gentleman says are so terrible?

Mr. Howard: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman consulted the Labour Members of the European Parliament before expressing any view on these issues. Of course, doing so would not have been very profitable, because, as my hon. Friends have pointed out, Labour Members of the European Parliament have been gagged and are not allowed to say anything on these and other matters.

On the changes to the common foreign and security policy, will the Minister of State confirm that, once the member states have agreed to adopt a common strategy, it will be possible to implement decisions by qualified majority voting? Will he tell us what is meant by a common strategy? It is nowhere defined in the treaty, so will he explain that when he winds up the debate?

Next, I come to the treaty's human rights provisions, to which my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) referred. Let us be clear about the fact that we place great importance on human rights; but the provisions in the treaty are wide open to abuse. It will be up to the member states to judge whether a country is guilty of serious and persistent breaches of the treaty's human rights provisions. There will be no independent arbiter and no right of appeal. Once found guilty, the member state concerned will not be expelled, but will instead have all its rights suspended, including all its voting rights, while continuing to be bound by its treaty obligations. If it is felt necessary to deal with the problem, why does not the treaty simply provide a power to expel those member states?

When the Prime Minister returned from Amsterdam, he said that he had put jobs in their rightful place at the top of the European agenda. We whole-heartedly agree that jobs should be at the top of the agenda, but how does the Prime Minister square that pledge with his acceptance of the social chapter and the new employment chapter in the treaty? Despite his pathological reluctance to face inconvenient facts, he must be aware that unemployment in this country is lower than in the rest of Europe. Here it is falling because we have a much more flexible economy and fewer burdens on our businesses. He must also be aware that his fellow socialist Governments seem hellbent on increasing the burdens imposed on business by Europe and that they want those burdens imposed on Britain so that we lose our competitive advantage over their economies.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Will my right hon. and learned Friend also examine this curious anomaly? If one is reasonably friendly towards the idea of a single currency, one must believe that we need as flexible a labour market as possible in those circumstances. Many of the ways in which we would otherwise deal with matters of distortion from one part of the European Union to another would no longer be in our hands. Is it not therefore surprising that those who want a single currency, or who are even more friendly towards the idea than some of my right hon. and hon. Friends, would proceed to make the European Union less flexible in that area, whereas they should have insisted on the British opt-out, to encourage others to follow them in pressing their case for a single currency?

Mr. Howard: It would be surprising, if one expected any clear thinking or consistency from the Labour party, but we already know, on the basis of the Government's record of the past six months, that it is idle to expect any clarity of thought or consistency from them. I therefore confess that I am somewhat less surprised than my right hon. Friend.

The question is: why on earth have the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister handed to the other countries of Europe the means by which they can impose on this country burdens that will impair our competitive advantage? After all, the Government are perfectly free to adopt any employment and social policy measures that they believe would boost employment in Britain because they have such a big majority. The social chapter, by definition, means that measures can be forced on us even when the Government do not believe that they are good for jobs.

For a long time, the Prime Minister tried to deny that that was so. Before the election, he tried to assure the Confederation of British Industry that he could prevent measures from being foisted on British business as a result of the social chapter, but even he has long since been forced to abandon that pretence. Last week, the Prime Minister was pressed on that by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, and he confirmed that the Government oppose the Commission's latest proposals to extend compulsory works councils. However, because the Government have abandoned our opt-out from the social chapter, and because of the provisions of this treaty and this Bill, the Prime Minister will be powerless to prevent that.

This is a bad treaty. It is bad for Britain and for Europe. The agreement reached by the Labour Government in Amsterdam was very different from that which a Conservative Government would have reached. We stood resolutely against the social chapter, whereas Labour signed up to it. We opposed the new employment chapter, which would expose British businesses to new costs. Labour signed up to a new employment chapter, extending the European Union's role to determining employment policy.

Mr. Radice: I have been listening carefully to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's speech and his arguments against this Bill. Does he still believe that the Amsterdam treaty amounts to a threat to the nation state, as he used to say?

Mr. Howard: What I said in the quotation that the Foreign Secretary used in his speech was that the agenda for the Amsterdam summit posed a serious threat. Some aspects of that threat did not come to pass—no thanks to the British Government. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there were on the agenda even more extensive proposals for qualified majority voting than were implemented at Amsterdam. What was implemented at Amsterdam is bad

[Mr. Howard]

enough, but the agenda was very much worse. It is no thanks to the Prime Minister or the Government that that agenda was not fulfilled.

Mr. Robin Cook: I am very interested in the right hon. and learned Gentleman's reply. Does he now think that the treaty does not pose a threat to the national interest or the future of Britain? Has he abandoned that criticism?

Mr. Howard: Of course the treaty poses a threat to the national interest. If the social chapter is used to impose burdens on British business which will damage our competitiveness and destroy jobs, of course that is a threat to British interests. That must be clear to all.

What we were discussing in the earlier exchanges were some of the constitutional implications which were originally on the agenda for Amsterdam, but not all of which have come to pass. Some have, and they are bad enough.

We opposed a new employment chapter that would expose British businesses to new costs. Labour signed up to a new employment chapter extending the role of the European Union into determining employment policy. We were pledged to win Britain an exemption from the damaging effects of the working time directive. Labour did not get a deal; in fact, the Government did not even try.

We opposed further extension of qualified majority voting. Labour signed a treaty that removed the veto of member states by extending QMV to 15 new areas. We said no to giving the European Parliament more power at the expense of Westminster. Labour agreed to give the European Parliament the power of veto in 23 new areas.

We pledged to curtail the excesses of the European Court of Justice. Labour abandoned our attempts to reform the workings of the court, and signed a treaty that does much to extend the remit of the European Court of Justice and nothing to reform it.

We pledged that we would insist on measures to stop quota hopping by foreign fishing vessels, and Labour came back with a worthless letter.

Finally, and perhaps most disappointing of all, we considered enlargement our key priority at Amsterdam; Labour signed a treaty that did nothing at all to further the cause of enlargement.

Mr. Dalyell: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howard: No, I have given way to the hon. Gentleman once.

The treaty is a wasted opportunity. It is also a victory for those who want a deeper, not a wider, Europe. The Government view our Parliament's powers with disdain. Since taking office, they have consistently whittled them away, parcelling them off to assemblies elsewhere in Britain, to Europe, to the Bank of England and to an unelected judiciary.

We Conservatives are proud of our Parliament. We believe that the United Kingdom is immeasurably greater than the sum of its parts; that power should be vested in those who are democratically accountable, not in unelected officials; and above all, that Europe will succeed only as a union of independent nation states.

The Amsterdam treaty further erodes the sovereignty of Parliament. It is a wrong turning for Britain and for Europe. The Bill would incorporate it into British law. I urge the House to decline to give the Bill a Second Reading.

4.47 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): So awful is the treaty which has been described that perhaps the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), were he still in government, would have vetoed it. Had he done so, he would have kept the United Kingdom in isolation from Europe, with enormous damage to British interests.

Perhaps it would be helpful to the House to descend from the fantasy politics which we have just heard and to examine the realities of the European situation and of the modest treaty before us. The treaty disappointed the aspirations of the Europhiles and the fantastical fears of the Euro-sceptics. I would have feared for our country, had the right hon. and learned Gentleman still been in office, with his worries of "them" ganging up against "us". If the previous Government had vetoed the treaty, that would have postponed for a substantial time the enlargement of the European Union, which he claims to espouse. The treaty is modest, and amounts to a tidying up of the Maastricht inheritance. It realistically reflects the mood of our times.

I turn first to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, whose report is before the House. We had hoped to produce a full report for the benefit of the House, as our predecessors did with the Maastricht treaty. Part of the problem was the Committee's late formation towards the end of July. The Government's decision to hold the Bill's Second Reading so soon meant that we were not able to provide that service to the House. We are not convinced that, if they had willed it, the Government could not have scheduled the Second Reading after the Christmas recess; the House could then have had the benefit of the work of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

In the event, the Committee was able to meet only my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary last Tuesday and the Chief Minister and the Leader of the Opposition of Gibraltar on the following day. The reports of those sittings are now before the House. We met the Chief Minister and Leader of the Opposition of Gibraltar because those senior politicians had expressed concerns on behalf of Gibraltar in their memorandums.

The result in practice is that prima facie there is a veto available to Spain over the extension of the Schengen agreement, which has particular relevance for Gibraltar, and, further, that the British Government might have to choose between our own perceived interests and those of Gibraltar. However, since there is no prospect of any British Government joining the Schengen acquis in the foreseeable future, that dilemma is unlikely to arise in practice. The events of 18 June were most unfortunate. I should add in parenthesis that both the Chief Minister and the Leader of the Opposition of Gibraltar made accusations against both this Government and our predecessors about failing to look after Gibraltar's interests in general. Those allegations must be examined carefully.

To understand the significance of the treaty, it must be viewed in context. In his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said that the treaty

"demonstrates that the high tide of integrationism in Europe was reached at Maastricht and that high tide is now at something of an ebb."

He described that as a "major step forward". By contrast, other commentators, such as Ian Davidson in the *Financial Times*, remarked with sadness on the same point:

"the integrationist model of the European Union is approaching the limit of what is politically acceptable to the nation state."

It is not as simple as that: a dynamic debate will continue about the frontiers of the nation state and the supranational entity. Clearly, the mood governing of the post-Maastricht agenda is, in part, a revolt by the people against those elites who went beyond what the people could accept at Maastricht. There is now greater caution and greater pragmatism, which were enshrined in the Amsterdam treaty. The protocol on subsidiarity, to which my right hon. Friend properly alluded, would not have been possible at Maastricht. Similarly, in Amsterdam, even Chancellor Kohl stood against certain extensions of qualified majority voting, partly because of his compact with the Lander over economic and monetary union. That would not have been possible at Maastricht.

In essence, I submit that the treaty was based on modest aims and resulted in modest gains. Clearly, the response of the Conservative party shows that it has learnt nothing from the isolation of the previous years which so damaged our interests in Europe. Indeed, Lord Howe described the Conservatives' stance on EMU as

"a purpose-free piece of ideological posturing."

His preface to a pamphlet issued by the Action Centre for Europe says:

"A worrying number of Conservatives have become trapped in a damaging mind-set, believing that creating artificial divisions and whipping up synthetic indignation on Europe can deliver political dividends. It cannot."

That is the world of fantasy politics which we have heard from the Opposition today. A good example was their exaggeration in respect of the human rights clause. The clause has a simple aim: to ensure that there is a guarantee that future members of the European Union—there are no anxieties about existing members—continue to respect human rights or face potential sanctions.

Sir Teddy Taylor: Could the clause, which provides, of course, for legislation to be made—I tried to ask the Foreign Secretary this question—be used in the European Court of Justice for actions by groups?

Mr. Anderson: No—partly because of unanimity, partly because of the safeguard of the two thirds majority in the European Parliament, and partly, of course, because it would have to go to the European Court of Justice as well. Anyone concerned with human rights should see it as a safeguard, a protection, in respect of the European Union. I hope that anyone who looks at it in a fair-minded way would reach that conclusion. It is indeed fantasy to suggest that it poses a threat in any way to this country.

Sir Teddy Taylor: I am so sorry, but I asked a different question. Could it be used by the Court?

Mr. Anderson *rose—*

Mr. Howard: I thought that I heard the hon. Gentleman say that the European Court of Justice was a safeguard in relation to this clause, but it has absolutely no involvement at all. The decision is taken entirely by other member states.

Mr. Anderson: It is one of the hurdles against which actions in respect of sanctions would have to be measured. I should have thought that the right hon. and learned Gentleman would welcome the fact that Europe is based not just on trade and commerce but on a set of values and human rights, which are enshrined, for the first time, in the treaty. It is equally absurd to suggest that within the modest steps on external policy there lurks a future European Foreign Secretary. There is a pragmatic change to meet the needs of the European Union as it develops.

It might properly be argued that, given its modest dimensions, historians will state that the Amsterdam treaty is far less relevant to the future of Europe than the other two engines for change that we now have—monetary union and enlargement. European monetary union is outside the scope of the treaty, and its greatest sin of omission is the failure to prepare for enlargement by re-weighting.

Mr. Radice: Is it not the case that negotiations for enlargement could not begin until the treaty of Amsterdam was signed? In a sense, the whole thrust of the arguments of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), that somehow the treaty of Amsterdam is blocking enlargement, is nonsense, like so much of the rest of his speech.

Mr. Anderson: The ending of the intergovernmental conference was the essential prerequisite, six months afterwards, to the start of negotiations on enlargement. In July, the Commission published its Agenda 2000. In many ways, that document deals with issues that are more relevant to enlargement than institutional changes such as re-weighting—issues such as the changes to the common agricultural policy and structural funds. Agenda 2000, which is to be discussed at the Luxembourg summit, is thus perhaps more relevant to enlargement than the institutional changes.

There is a danger of a coalition being formed of those who might be adversely affected by enlargement. They would include the Iberian countries and those who benefit from the cohesion funds, who would stand to lose from the financial adjustment. The important point is that the agricultural and structural funds now account for 85 per cent. of total European Union expenditure. Meanwhile, smaller countries, including the Scandinavian countries, fear that they will have less clout as a result; and there are those who fear the effect of the farming of Poland on their benefits from the common agricultural policy.

I only hope that there is sufficient historical perspective within the Union to allow such concerns to be seen only as negotiating points. The key is to re-create Europe by

[Mr. Anderson]

enlargement, to invest in democracy and to help to build a new zone of stability to the east. In building such a zone, it is also important to ensure that, when the favoured five, plus Cyprus—that is likely to be confirmed in December—are helped in the pre-accession period, the gulf is not deepened between those favoured five and those that are excluded: Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia.

I am worried about the sums available for the pre-accession period. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will consider that at the Luxembourg summit. There is an enormous disparity in the transfer of resources to new members. Over the period in question, for the favoured five the amount is 57.4 billion ecu, but it is only 17.4 billion ecu for the other applicants. That could, at first sight, deepen the divide between those that have aspirations to join the Union but do not as yet qualify, and those that are in the initial basket. In fact, the new countries can act as a bridge for those with aspirations further to the east and south.

Despite the signal failure to prepare for enlargement on the institutional side, Amsterdam will surely be seen by historians as a modest success. The Europe that will emerge will be more realistic, tidier in its procedures and more relevant. In terms of its relevance, I think of the strengthening of Community competence in areas such as health, consumer protection and co-operation in crime prevention—and, of course, the new employment chapter.

In his Dublin speech, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary set out the priorities—the people's priorities—for the presidency. I believe that this is part of the process of rescuing Europe from the elites and bringing it closer to the people. I am delighted that one of the Government's initiatives—taken with the Austrians, who will follow us next into the presidency—is to ensure that those priorities do not die at the end of the six months, and that the baton is then taken up by the Austrians and thereafter by the Germans in helping to re-create Europe in a more popular way.

I fully support the significant steps that have been taken in terms of external policy. The response to Europe's place in the world in the second pillar is a good example of the practical spirit of the treaty. There will be no great thrust towards a European Foreign Minister. There already is much policy co-operation in such areas as the accession treaties, foreign trade policy, the exchange of personnel and the work that is done in our diplomatic posts overseas.

The changes are mainly about mechanisms, but they are important mechanisms. I applaud the compromise on decision-making procedures, with the possibility of a constructive abstention. I also applaud the establishment of a new and continuing body to prepare and deal with implementation of the common foreign and security policy, and the new roles for the EU Secretary-General, the high representative, and the policy planning unit.

The new relationship with the Western European Union is also important, given that the treaty says in clear terms that NATO is and remains the cornerstone of our defence policy. For the Petersburg tasks, such as peacekeeping, the Western European Union will be the arm of the European Union.

On democracy, there is greater transparency in terms of access to European Union documents. There is also greater parliamentary control. I do not worry about the limited extension of qualified majority voting. I know that that triggers the co-decision procedure and a new role for the European Parliament, which is an elected Parliament. If we are serious about democracy, we must ensure that each cluster of power, be it in the European Union, at Westminster or in Scotland and Wales, must be subject to proper parliamentary accountability.

I am extremely pleased about the protocol on the role of national Parliaments, which provides for six weeks' notice. The House's Scrutiny Committee has pressed for that very strongly.

I have spoken about the Europe that will emerge. Europe is unique and sui generis. We should not seek to build a fantasy creation of our own imagination. In the past few months, I have travelled extensively and talked to European colleagues. There is a new spirit abroad following 1 May. No longer do we see doors barred to us: we are perceived to be part of a team working together to achieve common objectives. As Lord Howe has said, it would be "purpose-free ideological posturing" if we did not seek speedily to ratify this measure.

5.6 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): This will be the first time that I have been able to speak to the House on this subject as a free spirit since July 1988. I hope that the House will bear with me if I am somewhat rusty, and if I cannot slip as readily as the Foreign Secretary and the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) into the phrases and words of Europe. I used to be able to do so in my dim and distant past, but I cannot any more, and I shall probably not try.

I want to air my worries about the old-fashioned concept of nationhood. My great fear is that we are losing sight of that concept in the developing debate about Europe. I was delighted when the Foreign Secretary picked up that theme in his opening remarks. I was grateful to him for that, although whether it divides him from his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a matter for some thought. I was encouraged by the fact that he cast his remarks in terms of the nation state. I think that he used the phrase "the survival of the nation state". That gives me some encouragement, because at least it is now on the agenda.

Given the Chancellor's arguments on our possible membership of the single European currency, my fear was that the only factor that would decide whether we went ahead with membership would be a perceived or claimed economic benefit: the narrow claim about whether we would be better off. I think that it was even narrower than that at one point, as a result of the Government's new love affair with the Confederation of British Industry. They seemed to be saying that, if we could show that British membership of a single currency would benefit large firms that are members of the CBI, that would be sufficient justification and the argument would be over.

However, what the Foreign Secretary has said today broadens the debate, and that was proper and necessary. The treaty gives the House an opportunity to do that, and I am sure that, following the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the House will take that opportunity.

We are therefore talking about the incremental effect on our nationhood and national interests of a succession of measures—the treaty of Rome before we joined, the accession treaty and the measures since then. As the Foreign Secretary again rightly pointed out, the Single European Act, the Maastricht treaty and the Amsterdam treaty have, increment by increment, led to our greater involvement in the EU's workings and institutions.

With his typical candour and integrity, the hon. Member for Swansea, East made it clear where he saw that process leading. I picked up an interesting phrase of his. He referred to a "dynamic debate" about the "frontiers of the nation state". To him, the concept of the nation state is a moveable feast. It is negotiable and can be cut and adjusted to what he would no doubt view as the absolute imperative of our EU membership.

Mr. Donald Anderson: That is not the import of what I said. There is clearly a frontier, a creative tension, a dynamic, at any one time between the nation state and supranational demands, to many of which we shall accede for environmental and other reasons—it makes sense. The point is that there is no absolute fixture. The juggernaut towards supranationality has faltered. That is clearly shown in the modest accommodation in the Amsterdam treaty.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his elucidation. I suspect that he said "faltered" with a slightly regretful tone. I think that he would rather it had not faltered, but, even if it has, that does not alter the debate that we must have about the extent to which our increasing involvement in the Europe that most of our partners want is in our national interest. In the end, that is the only thing that matters to me.

The argument for us joining the EU in the first place was that it would enhance our national interests. Therefore, we have a duty to the people we represent constantly to revisit that issue and to ask ourselves whether the way in which the EU is developing is in our national interests. It is here that I part company from even some of my senior colleagues, who talk of this in terms of inevitability. They have said for many years that the EU is developing in certain ways, that that is inevitable and that there can therefore be no further argument about our participation either in the debate or in the EU's development. I could not dissent more strongly from that view.

What should be inevitable is that we ask ourselves the question: is the way in which the EU is developing in our national interest? Can it be demonstrated that it will benefit us as a people, not just in a narrow economic sense but in the sense of the overall reality of nationhood? Will that be enhanced or threatened by the way in which the EU is developing?

Let us take a small, but significant, example. The Foreign Secretary made some play of the fact that the extension of qualified majority voting in the treaty was of little consequence. He said that that was a practical measure and perfectly okay, and asked what everyone was getting so excited about. He then challenged us—I hope that I have made an accurate note of what he said—to give an example of where 14 other member states would gang up on us and do us down under extended qualified majority voting.

The interesting thing is that, just this morning, I had the delight and privilege of sitting in European Standing Committee A, where the Minister for the Environment took us carefully, courteously and knowledgably through the landfill issue. He said that he feared that, because we relied more on landfill than on incinerators to dispose of waste, our partners could not understand our problem with their wish to force us to use incineration more and landfill less. The Minister said clearly that he doubted whether he could persuade them to come around to our view.

I leave aside the new chumminess and partnership that are being created in Europe, so we are told, let alone the leadership role that the new Government were supposed to have—until I read yesterday that we were now dropping it quietly. My point is that I suspect that, in that Committee, we had an exact example of what the Foreign Secretary said would probably never happen: "Why should we be afraid?" he asked.

I grant that that is a small example, but that is the sort of thing I am talking about—gradual and incremental encroachment by the institutions and procedures of the EU as it develops and as the Amsterdam treaty seeks to develop it. That example may not be so significant in itself, but, if we add it to what has happened and, even more, to the aspirations of our partner member states, a different picture emerges.

That is what the treaty means to us. It involves more than the narrow focus that the Foreign Secretary gave us, and I know why he did so. Having opened the debate in terms of the nation state and its survival, he wanted to ensure that the House focused narrowly on the treaty's specifics, seeking to reassure us that it was of little or no significance. The significance—the Foreign Secretary will understand this, although I can see why he would not want to admit it to the House—is what lies beyond Amsterdam and what our partners' aspirations are. Do we as a people feel comfortable with those things? I certainly do not feel comfortable with them.

We are approaching a critical point in the development of our relationship as a nation state with the EU. If our partners persist in trying to develop the closer political union that they keep writing into almost every treaty and in posing a threat not just to our national institutions but to our ability to compete in the global marketplace as a nation that is uniquely reliant on trade, that may lead us as a nation state to ask ourselves: does our continued EU membership benefit us? If that happens, the blame will lie at their door.

I cannot understand why our EU partners do not realise that, particularly in view of the proposed enlargement, with which I have always disagreed.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Another division.

Mr. Forth: Does the hon. Gentleman want me to give way?

Mr. MacShane *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Forth: The almost universal drive towards enlargement could, at worst, threaten the EU's whole existence, which is why I cannot understand why everyone wants it. With that in mind, the EU would be well advised to develop itself in a way that was sufficiently flexible to allow not only countries such as

[Mr. Forth]

Britain but the new aspirants to feel comfortable with the way in which it worked, allowing us to say to our constituents, "You need not have the fears that are so often expressed to us."

Just today, two constituents have been expressing their fears about Europe, the way in which it is developing and the effect that it might have on things that they prize and are important to them. Whether we call them way of life or nationhood does not matter particularly, but we all know what we are talking about—or we should know what we are talking about.

I want to repeat my gratitude to the Foreign Secretary for widening the debate. My fear was that the Chancellor was going to try to ensure that, over the next few crucial years, the European debate would be focused ever more narrowly, so that the basis on which we were persuaded to commit ourselves more and more to the way in which Europe was going was ever narrower and therefore easier to justify. In this debate and with the words of the Foreign Secretary, we have a welcome opportunity to consider the issue on a broader front and in greater context, and to pose the question to ourselves and, ultimately, to the electorate: do we believe that the way in which the European Union is developing benefits us as a nation and as a people? Our relationship with the other EU member states and our future in the EU will depend on the answers that we give to that question from time to time.

5.19 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I am new to the ways of the House, so I am not sure whether it is appropriate or acceptable for me to say that I found the speech of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) extremely helpful and illuminating and I was pleased to have heard it. I do not intend to be disrespectful, but it contrasted with the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), who seemed to concentrate his fire entirely on my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, on whom he made an unjustified personal attack, rather than address the issues.

Although the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst rather extended the ambit of the debate beyond Amsterdam back to Maastricht and almost to the treaty of Rome—I suspect that that was not unintentional—he raised some important and percipient points.

As I said, I am new to the ways of the House, so I evaluate new legislation by limited criteria. The first is whether it is in Britain's interests. The Amsterdam treaty is overwhelmingly and demonstrably in Britain's interests, not just in respect of border controls, defence and the social chapter, but throughout. It certainly passes my first test.

We have heard a great deal about concepts of nationhood and nationality—those debates can be abstruse, but there may be a place for them—but Amsterdam also covered issues that affect my constituency in west London. One of the key developments that was covered in Amsterdam is the co-ordinated trans-European approach to crime. Europol was set up at Maastricht and it has been vastly strengthened by articles K.2 and K.9 of the Amsterdam treaty.

Like many others, my constituency in west London suffers the scourge of drug dealing. Although I would like to spend night after night debating definitions of nationality and nationhood, I spend a great deal of my time dealing with the debris and the crises caused by drug dealing on the streets of my constituency. The problem has to be addressed on the widest possible scale. The support for Europol in the Amsterdam treaty is the first chink of light, the first ray of hope for a co-ordinated attack.

Crime does not respect national boundaries and nor do criminals. Crime fighters must have the power to attack trans-national and international criminals. The progress made at Amsterdam on that important issue is one of the main reasons why I support the Bill.

People who are as old as I am and many who are not so old can remember the days of "Dixon of Dock Green" when crime was a local issue. The good, honest local criminal burgled only the next street. Then criminals got bicycles or Minis, and inter-city gangs sped up the M1. *[Interruption.]* I am in no way implying that Lord Tebbit's father had any responsibility for that.

Nowadays the police have to respond to a new pattern of criminal behaviour that is having disastrous consequences for many of our constituents. It involves drugs, money laundering and the trade in nuclear materials—something that I find astonishing. We cannot address international crime by withdrawing into our island state. Crime involves drugs, fraud and car theft, and has to be fought on a continental and international basis.

As a result of Amsterdam, Europol will be able to act in support of national police agencies. That makes the greatest sense, but Europol will have no operational role without the agreement of all member states. I suggest that article K.2 of the treaty is a pragmatic and sensible response to a modern pattern of criminal activity that cannot be addressed in any other way. People may say that if we were not part of the EU we could still have an FBI for Europe. I do not consider that to be a remote possibility. It simply could not happen. We could not refuse to participate in all the links and exchanges of information through the documentation and the joint computer systems that Europol is working on.

I apologise for concentrating on one sector, but having heard the quality of many of the earlier speeches, I know that a great many hon. Members can speak with far greater authority and knowledge on other specific subjects. I have concentrated on an issue that matters a great deal to me personally and to others who represent urban and inner-city constituencies.

Our participation in Europol is yet another demonstration—if one were needed—of the benefits to the United Kingdom of our continued and deepening membership of the European Union.

We have heard much about national sovereignty. What defines a nation is something far stronger than the subject we are debating today. A nation cannot be defined by a treaty, an Act or any of the issues that we have discussed today. It represents far more. I cannot believe that any of us here who speak for our nation feel in any way diminished as Britons, Scots or Welsh by the Amsterdam treaty. If we did, we would have a pretty weak nationalism.

Mr. Forth: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that what defines a nation will rarely, if ever, be found in a treaty.

My concern is that what threatens the nation may well be contained in a succession of treaties, and that we must be ever vigilant about that.

Mr. Pound: What threatens the nation has been addressed by the Amsterdam treaty specifically and not hypothetically. I cannot comment on what may happen further down the line. Today we are under threat, and in many ways Amsterdam addresses and responds to that threat. What happens in future will be discussed then. The Government have returned from Amsterdam with the best possible deal for Britain in Europe and the best deal for Britain and Europe.

I am no slavish lickspittle of the Front Bench; I am far too new to the job to have acquired such habits. I would be prepared to make the effort, but at the moment I simply try to speak my mind.

Earlier on, I was accused of trying to incorporate the Petersburg tasks into a somewhat unfortunate incident that occurred at Ealing town hall yesterday morning when a rocket was fired at the end of the two minutes' silence. It soared into the air and then fell to earth and ignited five cars in the car park. That is not why I am speaking today. I hasten to add that Ealing town hall is just outside my constituency.

The British Government have returned from Amsterdam as victor. They have secured an excellent deal for Britain. I do not know whether it is appropriate for me to commend it to the House, but if it is I do so, not just for myself as an individual but for us as a country. It is good for Britain and for Europe.

5.28 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North–East Fife): I cannot help thinking that the independence of the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) may be modulated by membership of the Foreign Affairs Committee or participation in the annual trip to the United Nations; this institution has many remarkable ways of ensuring loyalty to the Front Bench. Indeed, there will be a demonstration later this evening from the official Opposition of how loyalty to the Front Bench can be assured.

If we are to believe the Foreign Secretary, the Amsterdam summit was a triumph; if we are to believe the shadow Foreign Secretary, it was a disaster. They cannot both be right, but they can both be wrong—and they are.

The Amsterdam treaty is really a rather mild-mannered document that does not justify the apocalyptic consequences attached to it a moment or two ago by the shadow Foreign Secretary. He was right when he said that the treaty is more notable for what it omits than for what it contains.

The shadow Foreign Secretary told hon. Members who represent constituencies with fishing interests that, unless we go into the same Lobby as him today, we will be betraying the fishermen we represent. If he wants a sense of betrayal, he should come with me and talk to fishermen in my constituency, who feel a very deep sense of betrayal about the 18-year stewardship of British fishing interests by the Government of which he was a member.

As we are dealing with the European Union, I should mention the sense of betrayal about the continued and entirely unjustified refusal of the Conservative Government to provide adequate funds to match the money that was available from Brussels to decommission fishing vessels. Some of the problems of too much fishing effort—which hon. Members with fishing interests in their constituencies know about—could have been ameliorated if the Government of which the shadow Foreign Secretary was a member had taken a much more active role in promoting decommissioning by using the funds that were available.

It is quite right that all hon. Members are opposed to quota hopping, but we should remind ourselves that that practice has arisen because of the sale by British fishermen of licences, particularly to Spanish fishermen. Nothing was ever done by the previous Government to prevent those sales. Time after time, the Fisheries Council's December meetings were foreshadowed by statements that there would be no deal unless the issue of quota hopping was dealt with. Time after time, however, there was a deal; and time after time quota hopping was not dealt with.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman concede that the previous Government tried to do something about quota hopping but that our hands were tied by court judgments such as that in the Factortame case? It was not a matter of our lacking will. The will was certainly there for the intergovernmental conference—when the Foreign Secretary singularly failed to win any agreement.

Mr. Campbell: It is difficult to blame a Government who had been in office for perhaps six weeks when the Amsterdam treaty was negotiated for problems that were not capable of being dealt with by the Government that had responsibility for them for an entire 18 years.

One Fishing Council after another, we were told—the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) may attempt to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because he had responsibility for fishing at the time—that there would be no deal in December unless quota hopping was resolved, but it never was.

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: No, I shall make some progress.

A moment ago, I said that the Amsterdam treaty is more notable for what it omits than for what it contains. What is certainly true is that the challenge of enlargement has not been properly met. Specifically in the context of Amsterdam, there was no effort at common agricultural policy reform, without which enlargement will be financially impossible.

As hon. Members have already observed, no effort had been made to deal with the institutional implications of enlargement. How will larger member states be compensated for losing their second Commissioner? How will voting rights be rebalanced within the Union? If the European Parliament is capped at 700 Members, how many Members will be allocated to each member state? How will Commission portfolios—which are sometimes matters of great controversy—be allocated among Commissioners if there are more than 20 of them? Such functional issues demand early resolution if enlargement is to proceed.

[Mr. Campbell]

The treaty contains modest progress on common foreign and security policy, with protection of the United Kingdom veto. It provides limited extension of qualified majority voting. It accepts closer co-operation with the Western European Union but recognises the primacy of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. It creates greater clarity on subsidiarity and allows the United Kingdom to have some say on the social chapter.

Those are pretty modest achievements. They can be only modest achievements, or the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)—who takes an interest in these matters—would not be justified in describing Amsterdam as a "mouse of a treaty." He might have been a little more restrained in his metaphor if he had known that his support for a single currency would later cause the leader of the Conservative party to describe him, at least by implication, as a lemming. One has only to look at the right hon. and learned Gentleman to realise that neither his physical nor his intellectual bulk entitles one to describe him as a lemming.

Perhaps the mere use of such language—lemming is a silly description—tells us quite a lot about the Conservative party leadership's intentions towards the European Union. Such language sits particularly uneasily with a professed and much published desire to have an informed debate on a single currency.

Mr. Forth: Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is not relevant for the House simply to be invited to examine each treaty or measure in isolation, having been reassured that, "There is not much in it—so don't worry"? Does he agree that hon. Members are entitled to consider the totality of treaties and measures and the cumulative effect that they will have on our country and on our relationship with the European Union? At what point will he allow us such broad consideration?

Mr. Campbell: To echo something that was said earlier in the debate, I do not know whether my next comment will damage me more than it will damage the right hon. Gentleman. I thought that he made an honest speech. I have absolutely no difficulty with the totality of legislation currently directing the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, and the Liberal Democrats have never had such a difficulty.

In 1961, my party was the first to force a Division in the House on the matter. There were only six Liberal Members, but they forced a Division on the question of Britain's application to join what was then the European Community. They were defeated by several hundred votes to four—because they had to provide two Tellers and only four Members were able to go through the Lobby. We were proved correct on the matter very soon thereafter. Britain should have applied, and Britain did apply. I think that our membership has been entirely to the benefit of the people of the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made an honest speech in which he argued that matters have to be considered in the totality. I do not believe that Amsterdam represents any great leap forward that will destroy the values of the nation state, to which he and others obviously attach great importance. The rhetoric of the Conservative party leadership now seems to suggest that it has embarked on an anti-European pilgrimage of rather uncertain destination.

Never before—I am assuming that Conservative Members will vote according to the comments made in this debate by the shadow Foreign Secretary—has the Conservative party voted against a European treaty as a whole; this will be the first time. Moreover, it will be no selective cull of offending provisions but a launch into a systematic anti-Europeanism that has only one logical conclusion: advocacy of withdrawal.

Mr. Collins: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: No, I have given way already.

It will take brave spirits among Conservative Members to reverse that drift of opposition. To preserve even a flaccid unity on Europe, the Conservative party will require rather more than the temporary stimulus of opposition to the social chapter. Conservative Members may go into the same Lobby today—with one or two notable exceptions—but I predict that opposition to the social chapter will not sustain them very long after 10 o'clock tonight.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I am enjoying the hon. and learned Gentleman's speech. He said that, today, the Conservative party will for the first time vote against a European treaty. Is he aware that it is the first European treaty that has not been negotiated by a Conservative Government? Had we negotiated it, it would have been a better treaty and we would have been able to support it.

Mr. Campbell: I suppose that there is a lot to be said for self-confidence, particularly after 1 May 1997. It seems that that bonding down on the south coast had some effect and created such an aura of self-confidence that the only treaties that can ever be in the interest of the people of the United Kingdom are those that have been negotiated by Conservative Members. It is quite remarkable. I therefore wonder why Conservative Members attach such importance to the treaty establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation—the principal bulwark of British defence—which was negotiated and entered into by a Labour Government.

Mr. Streeter: That is not a European treaty.

Mr. Campbell: Ah, I see. It is not a European treaty; it has Americans in it. I suppose that the logic of that is that one can trust only the Labour party with the Americans.

What is in the treaty that should cause such offence? In my respectful submission, nothing at all. Much of what is in the treaty ought to be welcomed by the Conservative party. The United Kingdom keeps control over its borders, as we have heard. The primacy of NATO in European defence has been reasserted. The more ambitious plans for a common European defence policy outlined in the Maastricht treaty have been postponed—at least for some time. Even France has recognised NATO's vital role in continental defence and security.

Mr. Ian Taylor: The hon. and learned Gentleman is going through aspects of the treaty of Amsterdam of which I am heartily in favour, but that is not the issue

before the House. We are discussing the Bill to introduce into United Kingdom law certain aspects of the treaty of Amsterdam—not the treaty of Amsterdam itself. Included among the aspects that we are debating and which the Bill would bring into UK law is the social chapter.

Mr. Campbell: I shall come to the social chapter in due course, but it is worth putting into context the contents of the treaty, against which we must test whether we are willing to support the Bill.

As I said, foreign and security policy as a whole remains intergovernmental. There has been no move to incorporate it into the first pillar. There is some provision for the use of QMV in issues of common foreign and security policy, but member states will be entitled to reject such decisions for

"important and stated reasons of national policy".

Any decision with military or defence implications cannot be taken by QMV.

Efforts to improve—as I would see it—co-ordination and leadership of foreign policy have also been watered down. There is to be no independent foreign policy supremo.

Mr. Quentin Davies: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: No, I intend to try to make some progress.

The Secretary-General of the Council is to pass through some limited form of mutation to turn himself into a high representative under the Council's firm control in foreign policy matters.

Majority voting—it is true—has been extended. It will apply to such dangerous, damaging issues as compensatory aid for the import of raw materials and the adoption of the research framework programme. It is to be applied to issues of fraud. The Foreign Secretary's justification for that should have persuaded anyone in the House who has any anxiety about ensuring that value for money is obtained by the British taxpayer for any sums that go from this country to the European Union. It is to be applied in transparency. It is also to be applied—I do not believe that this has been referred to—to protection of individuals in relation to the use or processing of personal data about them. In such areas, QMV is clearly in the interests of the United Kingdom and in the interests of individual citizens of the United Kingdom.

QMV will not be extended to the right of free movement or to industry matters. As has already been pointed out, there is now a proper definition of subsidiarity, which shifts the burden of proof on to those who would support European Union action. A long list of criteria and provisos has to be satisfied before the EU can proceed. The Commission has to justify itself whenever it proposes a new measure.

The hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) pointed to the fact that the social chapter is one of the issues with which the Bill is concerned. If that is the basis on which the whole of the official Opposition are invited to oppose the Bill's Second Reading, it is a pretty flimsy basis indeed.

The social chapter has resulted so far in two particular measures. First, there is an obligation on large companies to establish works councils—something that more than 57 United Kingdom blue chip companies have already done, including BP, British Airways and many others. It is precisely the kind of industrial relations in successful companies which the whole House should support.

The other measure is a minimum requirement for parental leave. The qualifying conditions for parental leave are to be set by domestic Governments. So, in effect, a domestic Government can nullify the provisions by hedging them around in any way in which they choose.

Under the opt-out, which the official Opposition regard with such importance and significance, measures agreed by other member states would have applied to British firms operating in Europe without the British Government having had any influence on their contents. Serious opposition to the Bill cannot be sustained on such a flimsy basis.

Sir Leon Brittan, who I doubt very much will be invited to support his former parliamentary private secretary in the pending by-election in Winchester, argues today in a national newspaper:

"it is necessary to take a view of the treaty as a whole".

That is exactly right. Just as the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst wants us to take a view of the totality of legislation in relation to Europe, it is right to take a view of the Bill as a whole. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches take such a view and, like Sir Leon, we have no doubt that its acceptance is in Britain's national interest.

We all know that the House will not reject this Bill; what I hope it will reject is the blinkered opposition of the Conservative leadership.

5.45 pm

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I shall try to be brief and to emulate the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath)—another pro-European—in two respects: I shall speak without notes if I can, and I shall endorse the treaty. Nevertheless, I have one or two reservations about the final text.

I understand that the Patronage Secretary—the Chief Whip—receives each day a report about what is said by Labour Members. I hope that it will be reported that I support Parliament endorsing the Bill.

Before I come to the implications of the treaty for Gibraltar, I turn to the European Parliament. I notice—and regret—that the treaty enshrines in perpetuity Strasbourg as the seat of the European Parliament. Although that is not something about which people in Tilbury lie awake at night worrying, it is a pity that it should be in the treaty. The European Parliament should definitely be able to decide where it sits. It is illogical that it should have to sit in Strasbourg. Similarly, Europol's headquarters has been fixed at The Hague.

My main reason for speaking is to express concern at the way in which successive British Governments have treated the people of Gibraltar—a fact that is highlighted by the Amsterdam treaty, in which Gibraltar is referred to as a "territory" and never as "Gibraltar". Article 4 substantially disadvantages that colony for the future.

We have heard that there is no immediate prospect of the United Kingdom wishing to opt into the Schengen acquis. It may be some decades before we do so, but inevitably a Government, of whatever party, will wish to do so at some stage. Unanimity is required among the

[Mr. Andrew Mackinlay]

other member states for Great Britain—and Ireland—to go into Schengen. That puts a powerful tool at the disposal of the Spanish Foreign Ministry. The Spanish can say that the United Kingdom can come in minus Gibraltar. If there is no change in Spain's historic attitude to Gibraltar, I think that they will exercise that option.

A useful report appeared in *The Irish Times* of 7 July, which I suggest hon. Members may want to find in the Library. It sets out in considerable detail the final hours of the Amsterdam negotiations. I hope that the Minister will be able to deal with that. I understand that the Spanish proposal on article 4, relating to opting in to Schengen, was not challenged. When it was subsequently discovered that the treaty text required unanimity for opting in, the Dutch presidency replayed the tapes—of which it was the custodian—which showed that the proposal had not been challenged. Some explanation of what happened is required.

That episode also illustrates how not to conduct negotiations. Under the United Kingdom presidency, I hope that we shall ensure that any future negotiations are not time limited. All states should have good time to ensure that there is clarity and precision on what has been debated. That is fair to all parties involved.

I visited Gibraltar, with other hon. Members and the Foreign Secretary's Parliamentary Private Secretary, in the summer at the invitation of the Gibraltar Government. It was made clear to us, time and again, that they are left out of negotiations. Reference has been made to British interests. This is the Parliament of Gibraltar; there is no other. It is true that there is a local legislature, but there is a democratic deficit, because the people of Gibraltar are not represented here. Their Foreign Secretary is the Foreign Secretary who is answerable to this place.

If Ministers answerable to a Scottish Parliament may, in future, accompany Westminster Ministers to discussions and councils in Europe, that principle should be extended to the elected representatives of Gibraltar for matters that directly affect the interests of Gibraltar. I implore the Minister to think about that and also to ask his colleagues in the Government to reflect on it. Many international discussions affect the people of Gibraltar. Their interests should not be excluded.

The Government are no different from the previous Government in that respect. The Conservative Government of recent years consistently neglected the interests of the people of Gibraltar. It has now become endemic in Foreign Office thinking—not the Ministers'—that the people of Gibraltar are just also-rans and do not need to be worried about. That is wrong. It is time that we stood up and said that that cannot be tolerated. Other territories of other countries are taken into account by their negotiators. That is necessary for Gibraltar, too.

The article in *The Irish Times* makes it clear that the episode was not the fault of Mr. Bruton or of our Prime Minister. The speed and timing of the negotiations were unsatisfactory. I hope that the British presidency will mark a new standard in the conduct of negotiations.

I endorse the opening comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson). As well as making similar comments to mine on Gibraltar, he said that the Foreign Affairs Committee, of which he is the Chairman, should have had more time to consider the treaty. Labour Members were elected with a mandate and a desire to improve the status and influence of Select Committees. I am proud of that. Even if it is inconvenient for the Government, Ministers must meet the needs of the independent scrutiny Committees. I use the word "independent" deliberately. It is not easy to make the comments that I have made, but as long as I am in the House, I intend to guard jealously the right to scrutinise the Executive—Labour, Conservative or any other party. There is always a danger of that being eroded.

I endorse the treaty, and I hope that the Bill will be passed, but I also hope that we can amend it in Committee to ensure that, if Britain ever wishes to enter Schengen, it goes in with Gibraltar, or that the people of Gibraltar have a say in—

Mr. Radice: The treaty cannot be amended.

Mr. Mackinlay: My hon. Friend says that the treaty cannot be amended. I know that, but we can amend the Bill that brings it into effect. I understand that the amendment that I have canvassed with the Clerks may well be within the terms set out in "Erskine May". I have anticipated the point that my hon. Friend, who has been here many years, has raised. I am well aware of what can and cannot be done to a treaty and a Bill.

5.56 pm

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): I regard the treaty of Amsterdam rather as I regard many of the young men who pursue my twin daughters. I have nothing much to say against them and not a great deal to say in favour of them. It is a nondescript document, noteworthy largely for what is not in it rather than what is.

I welcome the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary, again largely for what was not in them. I welcome the absence of any reference to a referendum or to renegotiation. I am sure that my hon. Friend who winds up will wish to sustain such admirable reticence in his comments.

To our mutual surprise, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) and I will be in the same Lobby tonight. I should like to point out what is good about the treaty, within its great limitations. It maintains a clear distinction between what is done on an intergovernmental basis and what is done on an integrated basis—the so-called pillared approach, in the dreadful jargon that has overtaken European institutions and many others.

A more pragmatic attitude is beginning to develop in the European Union. That is a welcome reinforcement of the idea that differential integration within a clear framework is compatible with the way in which the European Union can develop. That is evident in the provisions relating to Schengen, with the rider that the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) and others have mentioned about the Gibraltar glitch. It is evident in the provisions for the incorporation of the asylum and immigration controls, within the integrated framework from the original pillar. Those who have decided not to be part of it can decide to opt in. It is also evident in the terms for foreign policy collaboration, the status of which can be transformed within the union.

That is sensible, permitting member states to remain outside and giving them a differential means to opt back in. There is a two-way differentiation in the way in which

co-operation is envisaged. That is a welcome change from the monolithic dirigisme and integrationist imperative that has been too dominant in the European Union.

I welcome also the human rights clauses, and I do not think that they are a threat. The European Union has to be seen not only as an economic opportunity for aspirant member states, but to some extent as a civic and democratic guarantor. If it is not that, it does not deserve to be anything.

That role is especially necessary with the new states of eastern Europe, which do not have rooted democratic cultures. If the treaty included a provision to expel, and one of those member states found itself under an inimical and anti-democratic Government, its expulsion would do nothing to give it an incentive to change its ways and return to a democratic system. The treaty is sensible in putting the sanctions at the current level.

I also welcome, in general, the extension of qualified majority voting, because it has been the mechanism that has delivered British objectives in Europe more comprehensively than any other measure in the treaty. The single market, which was an outstanding British objective, would not have been delivered without qualified majority voting. How often did I hear Mrs. Thatcher, who was a distinguished Prime Minister, say that we wanted a real common market. Qualified majority voting delivered a significant part of that real common market, and I hope that it will continue to do so.

Mr. Forth: Can my right hon. Friend envisage circumstances in which qualified majority voting might operate against the British national interest?

Mr. Curry: In all qualified majority votes, some get what they want and others do not. Europe is a kaleidoscope of shifting alliances in which nobody is ever dominant and nobody is ever oppressed, and that is the key to it. If my right hon. Friend checked the history of United Kingdom demands and requirements against the occasions on which we lost, he would find that Britain did not usually lose. Indeed, I remember how, when the French did not seem to know what they wanted from the European Union, they lost year after year in the Council of Ministers, because nobody knew whether it was worth negotiating with them.

I accept that qualified majority voting inevitably raises issues of accountability. Therefore—I realise that many of my hon. Friends do not agree with me, but I shall say it unrepentantly—I welcome the modest improvement and simplification of the powers of the European Parliament. We must avoid a geometric concept of power in the European Union that suggests that anything that goes there must necessarily come from here, because that dynamic does not represent the true circumstances in the European Union. The question is how we attain accountability for functions and decision taking that are already federalised, if I may use that word. I do not believe that the House can achieve that, because qualified majority voting makes it difficult for any legislature to bind a Minister who has to take part in negotiations in the Council of Ministers.

If a Minister has any sense, he will seek to participate in a qualified majority in the Council of Ministers, rather than being locked out. That means that he has to negotiate. He will not be easily bound by injunctions placed on him by his national Parliament. A Government are likely to look over their shoulder at their Parliament only when their majority is precarious. If, for example, there is a multi-party coalition, their majority will be at risk if they come back with something that the Parliament does not like. But even if a Minister is subject to sanction by a Parliament, it does not alter the decision that he has taken. The mere fact that he is subject to sanction may render him incompetent, in the real sense of the word, at negotiating in the Council of Ministers, and less able to defend his national interest than would otherwise be the case.

I have no great enthusiasm for the European Parliament per se, although my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst and I spent some years as Members of it. However, I have concluded from watching the European Union as a journalist, as a member of the Council of Ministers, as a Member of the European Parliament and as a Member of Parliament, that the effective way to achieve accountability must be for an institution to enjoy the same sort of supranational status as the Council, if it is to work in practice. That is a pragmatic conclusion, not a principled or ideological one.

I come to what is wrong with the treaty—again, it is the omissions. One could argue that the human rights clause anticipates enlargement. I accept that enlargement negotiations may now begin because the treaty has been agreed. However, the truth is that the reform of the institutions, which we all agree is urgently needed, has not yet started. We talk endlessly about reform—including reform of the voting in the Council of Ministers, of the way in which the presidency is held and of the way in which the Commission is constituted. Those issues sound tedious and bureaucratic, but they go to the heart of the ability of member states to influence the European Union and the ease with which its business can be dispatched effectively. That will require another treaty, and, indeed, the Heads of Government have admitted that that is inevitable.

Europe has a long and melancholy history of failing to take decisions in good time and thus having to improvise or go beyond what might have cured the problem had it been dealt with earlier. The reform of the common agricultural policy is a classic example. However, I caution people about talking too glibly about the reform of the CAP, because I have never yet come across a reform that did not cost more than the original it replaced.

I am also hostile—for the reasons that many of my hon. Friends have explained—to the incorporation of the social chapter. I do not like it and I do not like the introduction of the employment chapter. When the Foreign Secretary was boasting about the employment chapter, he neglected to remark that it was a platonic addition to the treaty. He also did not say that the British Government had worked with the Germans, with enormous enthusiasm, to denude of any real purpose the proposals made by France, Italy and Sweden. The Foreign Secretary rejoiced in the chapter, and I gather that he also rejoices in the fact that it means practically nothing in reality.

The way forward for employment is through supply-side measures, such as the liberalisation and deregulation of sectors such as transport and telecommunications, and not through intervention. We must look out lest employment policies are used to counter the strong anti-inflationary policies of a central bank which will eventually manage the single currency.

[Mr. Curry]

Europe should be about politics, not religion. If every time Europe is mentioned, the so-called Europhiles are supposed to apply uncritical acclaim while singing the "Ode to Joy" and the Euro-sceptics are supposed to leap to the barricades while belting out "Land of Hope and Glory", we are condemned to the politics of immature polemics. I hope that we can avoid that in the House.

The British response to developments in Europe follows a pattern. We start by saying that whatever is proposed is not necessary. We then say that it will not happen. We then say that it will happen, but only later. We then say that it will happen, but it will not work. We then say that we need not join, and then we say, "Help!" The result of that syndrome is that we tend to decide to join late, grudgingly and when the framework has been set.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that we have to decide whether we will be full-hearted members of the organisation or whether we will get out. Do we want to be in or out? As matters stand, with our late, grudging accession, we have neither independence nor leadership. That is a sad situation that is not worthy of the traditions and history of this country.

I also say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst that there is no eternal or immutable concept of a nation state. The nation state that Gladstone or Palmerston managed is wholly different to the nation state that is feasible in today's world. Economic interdependence and the movement of money and technologies have changed the practical reality of the concept of the nation state. If we are to defend the nation state, we must realise that the concept does not have an eternal verity. We must judge it in the light of the realities of changing circumstances, as I am sure my right hon. Friend would agree.

Mr. Forth: Of course my right hon. Friend is right, but does he accept that a time may come when what one might regard as the irreducible elements of a true nation state—which the members of a nation state feel comfortable with and believe to be necessary—might be threatened by unwanted developments in the European Union? Is that a possibility?

Mr. Curry: The concept that my right hon. Friend suggests might be threatened. Equally, I would argue that a Europe without a European Union in it would feel infinitely more threatened by the developments that would have taken place in the post-war world—notably the absence of restraints on the development of Germany, an economic powerhouse with its 80 million people, and the probable preferred partner of the United States—than what threatens us within that framework. But that is a wider debate, which I should be delighted to continue with my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Cash *rose—*

Mr. Curry: I promised to be brief, and I am on my last paragraph. I want to give other hon. Members a chance.

I believe that the treaty is a poor one, which fails in its central task. It is not a wicked treaty; it just does not do the job. That is why, with an absolutely clear conscience, I can vote against it tonight.

6.9 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry); 97 per cent. of the contents of his speech would be warmly endorsed by most Labour Members. It is a pity that we did not hear such speeches from him when he was a member of the Conservative Government. Nevertheless, it was good to hear one today.

I spoke in European debates several times in the previous Parliament, and I am struck by the difference in tone today, compared with those interminable hours in Committee on the Maastricht treaty. The heart seems to have gone out of the Europhobes. They have not got the enthusiasm—

Mr. MacShane: Where are they?

Mr. Gapes: That is an interesting question. The Europhobes do not seem to have the same enthusiasm for their cause any more. I suppose that, when people have fought a general election in which most of their colleagues were wiped out, although the previous Government said that they would stop the show—let us remember all those "show stoppers" that the former Foreign Secretary told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee about when he came before us to give evidence during the previous Parliament—and when people see that, despite Mr. Sykes's millions, their party went down to humiliating defeat, that leads to some reassessment of the situation.

The tone has changed, but there are still a few individuals who, as the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), showed us, are still capable of artificial hysteria about this modest treaty. That was the description used by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell).

The Amsterdam treaty is modest, but it represents a major achievement—*[Laughter.]* Oh yes, it does. It is a major achievement, because the Conservative party told us that there would be no treaty—that they would lay down lots of clauses and conditions to stop the treaty, and make sure that it did not emerge.

The Tory press and the Europhobes in general also told us that the new Labour Government would not be capable of signing any treaty that was in Britain's interests, because our continental partners would walk all over us. On the contrary, as the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon has just revealed, the treaty contains some important achievements, which are in the interests of our country.

Mr. Forth: Modest.

Mr. Gapes: The treaty is modest, but it is positive, too, and only a change of Government made it possible to achieve it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order.

Mr. Gapes: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I think I am capable of looking after myself.

The treaty was achieved by a Government who did not say, "We will reject everything that comes from across the Channel," but who said instead, "We will engage

positively with our partners, build alliances and work together for a better European Union, to prepare the basis for future developments that will come with the British presidency from January, and for the future enlargement negotiations which the treaty makes possible."

I always fail to understand how, if the Conservative party was really in favour of enlargement, it could adopt the strategy of saying that there would be no agreement. Agreement was necessary to unlock the process of enlargement. Moreover, if Conservatives were in favour of enlargement, why on earth did they oppose the extension of qualified majority voting in any area? That is a palpable absurdity. It is impossible to have any enlargement of the European Union without extending QMV to make the Union work effectively.

I think that the treaty has done enough to enable the enlargement process to begin, but not enough to make it possible to conclude that process successfully. Therefore, we shall have to return to the issue in the discussions that will result from the enlargement negotiations over the next few years.

I hope that, by that time, the Opposition will have had another think. If they really want enlargement to succeed, and the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and perhaps in time the Baltic states and other states, to come into the EU, they will have to recognise that an EU with 25 or 26 members cannot be the same as it is today,

In that process, we also need to examine the financing of the Union. That will involve difficult issues. Over the next few years, countries such as the Irish Republic, which are now net recipients from the European Union, will have to face the fact that, partly because of their own economic growth and partly because poorer countries will come into the Union, they will cease to be net recipients from Community funds.

Other countries will face similar problems on regional aid policy. It is important that we all recognise that some of the wealthier countries will have to make a contribution for enlargement to succeed. Part of what we need will come from common agricultural policy reform, which is so necessary. But that will not provide it all, and we shall have to face the fact that enlargement, which in political and security terms—and even in economic terms, in the long run—will be of great benefit to us, will have a short-term cost.

I was pleased with the statement a few weeks ago by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, which for the first time showed us the possibility of having a Government who said that in principle this country should be part of the European single currency.

In his important document, in which he set out the five economic conditions that must be satisfied to comply with the requirements of the single currency, the Chancellor also made it clear that in the meantime we would work positively to achieve greater co-ordination in ECOFIN among Finance Ministers within the European Union.

I believe that that development, too—building on the work in the Amsterdam treaty—will be of great benefit to us in the years to come. Clearly, the Government's statement a few weeks ago that there was no constitutional bar to British membership of EMU is of great significance, and most welcome. However, the longer we stay out of EMU, the more likely it is that the consequences will be politically damaging to this country.

In signing the Amsterdam treaty, we have begun to put Britain's relations with the rest of the EU on an even keel. We have begun to repair the damage caused by 18 years of anti-European rhetoric and policies.

Although the Labour Government's positive developments have prepared the ground for a successful British presidency, there are some worrying signs. The meeting of the French, German and Russian Governments in Strasbourg was a sign that we have to be careful to build on our positive relationships, both bilaterally and in a co-ordinated way with groups of other European Union member states.

It is not enough for us to wait for eventual membership of economic and monetary union, because in the meantime staying out of the process might have politically damaging consequences. We need to work at all levels to build relationships with our partners.

We need a strong European Union, both for the future of Europe and on the global stage. The way in which the United States Administration has used the World Trade Organisation to damage the interests of Caribbean banana producers in favour of the large multinationals that produce cheaper bananas in Latin America is cause for great concern. We need to have a strong collective European Union voice for those occasions when America pursues its self-interest, to the detriment of poorer countries.

In international trade negotiations, the European Union must be outward-looking, and consider the future not only of our continent but of many countries elsewhere, including many small island economies that have an historic association with us as part of the Commonwealth.

Mr. Forth: Why does the hon. Gentleman assume that, if the United States, with its size and influence, pursues only its narrow self-interest, at the expense of others, the European Union would not be equally prone to doing exactly the same, with or without us?

Mr. Gapes: There is a big difference between the international relationships of the United States and those of the European Union. African, Caribbean and Pacific countries have historic links with us, and through the Lomé negotiation process, we have always tried to take account of their interests. I believe that Britain and France in particular have a duty, because of international links with their former colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, to look to those wider interests.

There is a tradition, here and in other European Union countries, of contributing much more to international aid than the United States, which spends a far lower percentage of gross domestic product per head on aid than many European countries, including the Nordic countries, the Dutch and Britain. It is important for Europe to work collectively, because only in our collective strength can we act as a counterweight to American power. I refer not to military power but to economic weight and the political influence that goes with it.

The common foreign and security policy is one of the most important parts of the Amsterdam treaty. I was one of those who, in the previous Parliament, despite being strongly identified with being in favour of the European ideal, had strong reservations about some of the ideas emanating from France in particular about the role of the Western European Union in relation to the European Union.

[Mr. Gapes]

I am very pleased that the Amsterdam treaty does not in essence go much further in that matter than the original Maastricht treaty. We are saying that there may be development of a common defence policy, but not of European Union common defence. The emphasis is still firmly on NATO, and I believe that that is right for European security and in relation to enlargement. There is no way, in my opinion, in which we could have an easy enlargement of the European Union to include countries of the former Warsaw pact if we mixed up defence in the process.

We have witnessed the controversies about NATO enlargement and the signals that the idea sends to the Russians. It would not be in our interests, and would cause great difficulties for those countries with a tradition of neutrality, such as Austria, Ireland, Finland and Sweden. Therefore, the outcome of the treaty is sensible.

The Governments of the European Union have to some extent recognised in the treaty the concern that we were discussing institutional arrangements but not connecting with the general public. More needs to be done on that. Some countries will hold referendums to ratify the treaty, and it is important that all countries endorse it as quickly as possible, so that we can tackle the more important issues of the future financing and enlargement of the European Union. I am confident that the Labour presidency in the first six months of 1998 will set us in a good direction towards that goal.

6.26 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): To echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), I am pleased to contribute to the debate as another free spirit in the Conservative party, and to put on record my views and concerns about the treaty.

I begin with these words:

"Our vision of Europe is of an alliance of independent nations".

Those are the words of the Labour party manifesto for the general election. It seems to me, from comments by both Opposition and Government Members, that, in considering the ways in which the Bill affects us as a nation state—as it affects our sovereignty—we cannot take the Amsterdam treaty in isolation .

As Conservative Members have said, the danger for the House and the nation is that what may, as an individual treaty or a small piece of legislation, seem innocuous, may develop a pattern over the years that shows us that there are those in the European Union who have a different agenda—some hon. Members who have spoken tonight might well agree with them—from the concept of Europe as an alliance of independent nations.

From now on, we must measure against that background every treaty we sign, and every substantial negotiation in which we engage, because that is how we can decide whether we end up with an alliance or—as is clearly the ambition of many of our European partners—with a country called Europe. That is very different from an alliance of nation states.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said, this was the first test of the Government's negotiating skill. The Prime Minister told the House when he announced the outcome of the European Council at Amsterdam:

"We . . . promised to bring a fresh and constructive approach to Europe and to the negotiations."—[*Official Report*, 18 June 1997; Vol. 296, c. 313.]

That bears more careful scrutiny when we consider some of the announcements that have been made, and some of the issues that have been completely neglected.

The Labour party's manifesto flagged up its agenda. It said:

"We will seek a thorough overhaul of the Common Fisheries Policy to conserve our fish stocks".

During the election campaign, the Prime Minister told "The World at One":

"We certainly have not ruled out holding up IGC business in order to get the right changes on fishing policy in the British interest".

Labour Members have suggested tonight that the Conservatives were somehow wrong to flag up well before the Amsterdam conference their concerns about quota hopping and the fisheries policy. We considered it high on our agenda. However, even during the election campaign, the Labour party thought that the issue was sufficiently important for the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) to refer to it on prime time radio. That all dissipated quickly after 1 May.

I represent a seat in the west country. It is not a coastal seat, but fishing is of importance not only to the people who go out to sea but to the much wider community. Communities in the south-west of England are dependent on the fishing industry. The hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said that the previous Government had failed to deal with the problem of quota hoppers. This very House introduced the Merchant Shipping Act 1988, which sought to give it powers to interpret the fishing rules, as applied by the treaty of accession. The Act sought to ensure that we had something to which the Labour party should give recognition.

Labour Members use the words "fairness" and "justice" a lot. Fairness and justice in British fishing policy is non-existent, as a result of the way in which the common fisheries policy has turned out. That is contrary to what the British Government believed they were negotiating in the treaty of accession.

The European Court of Justice did not find in our favour. It overturned legislation passed by the House to protect our fishing interests in a fair and just way. That was why the previous Government took such a robust stand. They saw the treaty of Amsterdam as an opportunity to correct that injustice, and bring back some fairness for our fishermen. Yet we have heard that fisheries were not even debated at Amsterdam.

The Foreign Secretary did not explain today why the Labour Government ditched their policy. I hope that the Minister who is to reply to the debate will explain why quota hoppers are no longer a matter of importance to the Government.

What were the fishermen expecting? They had every expectation that Amsterdam would resolve the problem of quota hopping. All that the Foreign Secretary came back from Europe with was a piece of paper which simply reiterated the law as we understood it.

Mr. Forth: Peace in our time.

Mrs. Browning: Peace in our time, as my right hon. Friend says. That was the outcome of the Government's negotiations on fishing.

The Spanish were able to take advantage of the Government in the small hours of the morning, when the British seat was unoccupied because people had gone home thinking that Europe kept normal hours. Whatever the reason, the Government were not represented when Gibraltar was discussed. The Spanish must have gone home from the negotiations thinking that they had had a pretty good outing. They got our fish, and now there is a big question mark over our powers to negotiate on and protect Gibraltar.

The measures on fishing and on Gibraltar clearly show that there is more to the treaty of Amsterdam than the large issues to which the Foreign Secretary tried to restrict us in his opening remarks. He admitted that the mix-up over Gibraltar was a misunderstanding.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) gave the House some extremely important news about tapes in the possession of the Dutch presidency. I ask those on the Treasury Bench to ensure that, in the reply to the debate tonight, we hear exactly what action the Government intend to take to apprise the House of the situation, now that the hon. Gentleman has brought it to the Floor of the House.

I have some concern about the views expressed by the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) in respect of that part of the treaty which refers to the merging of the European Union and the Western European Union. I have spoken about the agenda that others are following. It may not be the agenda that all of us in the House wish to follow, but it exists. The agenda of some countries is not a pragmatic division between NATO and the EU in defence matters.

The Foreign Secretary admitted to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee on 4 November:

> "The ambition of some of the countries at Amsterdam was to absorb the WEU in order to bring European security and defence identity within the EU."

So it is clear that an agenda different from the Amsterdam treaty is running. We should not be cavalier and disregard that.

One of the points raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst worries many of us. If the policy changes with each treaty and each piece of legislation, the EU could end up absorbing the WEU. I am sure that those who seek that outcome will continue to move towards it step by step. The hon. Member for Ilford, South is smiling. He has a knowing look on his face. I think that he is about to tell me, "You've cracked it. You've got it right. That is what they are up to."

Mr. Gapes: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady: I am about to tell her that she has misunderstood what I said. I said that I was pleased that the Government had succeeded in stopping precisely the development about which she has expressed concern.

If she looks closely at the wording of the Amsterdam treaty, she will find that, in all its essential respects, the part dealing with common foreign and security policy is remarkably similar to that signed by the Conservative Government in 1991, when, under a joint British-Italian initiative, they produced a form of words similar to the wording in the treaty. I quoted those words.

While I accept that there are differences, the hon. Lady should accept that the Labour Government have succeeded with others in ensuring that the Amsterdam treaty does not go the way that she is worried about.

Mrs. Browning: I am not so convinced as the hon. Gentleman obviously is, simply because other aspects of that element of the policy give me cause for concern—not least the incompatibility of those nation states he mentioned, which for a long time have refused to join NATO even though they have been invited to do so. They have sought instead to protect their neutrality. We must ensure that there is no equalisation between EU nations and long-established members of NATO. Some people wish to bring them together, or perhaps even work towards a position in which Europe eventually takes control of its own foreign and defence policy. That gives me cause for concern.

Although I believe that Europe should pay its fair share and be responsible for its own defence policy, and that each nation state should do so, I do not believe that destroying the NATO alliance between America and Europe would be a good move for the peace of the world. It is a dangerous option. We know that some people have an agenda to work towards that outcome.

Labour has accepted more majority voting in the operation of the CFSP—to implement joint actions, common positions and common strategies. I appreciate that a qualified veto is maintained, for important stated reasons of national policy. However, the concept of constructive abstention has been introduced. A country may opt out of a CFSP decision but allow others to go ahead.

That marks another move away from common decision making. Action will still be taken in the name of the European Union, and the treaty proposes:

> "When abstaining in a vote, any member of the Council may qualify its abstention by making a formal declaration under the present subparagraph. In that case, it shall not be obliged to apply the decision, but shall accept that the decision commits the Union. In the spirit of mutual solidarity, the Member State concerned shall refrain from any action likely to conflict with or impede Union action based on that decision".

That suggests that the EU may prevent a member state from acting in its national interests, if it goes against the view of the majority. That is the salami-slicing tactic: innocuous because the step appears small, but, from successive treaties and documents over the years, we can see that it moves us even further towards that nation called Europe.

I would disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst—

Mr. Forth: What? I beg your pardon?

Mrs. Browning: Yes, I am going to disappoint my right hon. Friend, and disagree with him on one small point.

I do not think that the time is right, or that it would be proper, to say that we should come out of Europe; but, as my right hon. Friend rightly identified, Parliament should examine the changes in Europe over the years and in the foreseeable future, and measure those against that statement in the Labour party manifesto. If we find that,

[Mrs. Browning]

through sleight of hand or small step by small step, we are close to becoming part of that nation called Europe, we should measure it against Labour's own benchmark—

"Our vision of Europe is of an alliance of independent nations."

That has to be the key test, and it causes many hon. Members great concern. I say that as someone who was a member of the previous Government, and who was here and voted for the Maastricht treaty—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members make a joke of that, but some of us look with great concern at the way in which the pattern has developed and is developing, whoever was or is in government.

I am not saying that whatever was done by the Conservatives was a good thing and whatever was done by other Administrations was a bad thing; I am saying that, if Labour wants its pledge to be taken seriously—I hope that it is to be taken seriously—the House must call the Government to account on behalf of the people.

The Government are now the people sitting at the negotiating table, and it is by Labour's own benchmark that we must judge what we put our signature to as a nation. We must judge whether we remain a sovereign nation state, or whether we are moving towards that country called Europe. If the latter, the points made this evening by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst bear closer examination and questioning.

Attention has been drawn to the extension of qualified majority voting. Some hon. Members have said that that is a good thing, but, as Conservative Members have asked, what does qualified majority voting mean in practice to Parliament, and to our right to make our own decisions?

As someone who served for three years in the Ministry of Agriculture, where qualified majority voting applied to 95 per cent. of all the decisions taken in Europe, I have had a great deal of first-hand experience of what qualified majority voting means. It means that, as a Minister, I appeared before hon. Members in the Scrutiny Committee and had to explain why a cartel was running in the negotiations.

I hope that this does not sound pompous, because it is not intended that way, but I warn Ministers that, when they sit through many European negotiations—especially those involving departmental Ministers with a year or more of experience in negotiating the fine points of individual pieces of legislation—they will quickly learn that it is all about horse trading, as countries such as the southern European countries come together.

To get a satisfactory outcome requires more than having right on one's side, or having the national interest on one's side—one needs something in the bag to give in exchange. That is why it is appalling that, at Amsterdam, the Government gave so much without getting much back. I hope that the Government will quickly learn that, whether we like it or not, that is the way the game is played over there. It is no good their taking the high moral ground and saying, "Of course we will do what is in the British interest." Ministers must go into every negotiation knowing what they are prepared to concede, and exactly what they intend to win.

I have to admit that it is an excruciating experience to appear, as a Minister, before a Committee of this democratically elected House—with hon. Members on both sides asking probing questions on the issue involved—and having to tell the Committee how negotiations are going and what we are seeking to gain, while knowing all the time that, if we are out-voted under qualified majority voting, the concerns of the Committee will not matter a fig. We have no power: power has gone from this Parliament, and power is going from this Parliament, because that is how qualified majority voting works in practice.

In the spirit of friendship, I will give a word of advice to Ministers: as time goes by, there will be times when they know that they are unable to win one, and there will be a clear temptation to look for the virtues in the defeat, so as to be able to sell it back home. That is not a good thing. It leaves a nasty taste. Those of us who have had to do it know that there is nothing democratic about it, and it has nothing to do with a sovereign parliament.

When we have to look for the good in something that is not in the national interest, we know that we have already gone too far. In his speech to the Conservative party conference, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was right to say that he felt that, in his view, we had probably gone as far as we wanted to go on integration.

6.46 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am interested to follow two former Conservative Ministers, one of whom said that Britain should reconsider its membership of the European Union, while the other said that the time was not right, but, by implication, it could well be in the near future. Given that lukewarm adherence to and support for the European Union, it is hardly surprising that we have lacked influence in the councils of Europe over the past 18 years.

I am happy to speak tonight, because we are at an historic and significant turning point in terms of Britain's relationship with Europe. I say that for three reasons: first, in the past two weeks, we have heard the most positive statement about support for economic and monetary union ever heard from a British Government. We want it to succeed and, if it does, we want to be part of it. Secondly, with today's Second Reading debate, the Government are clearly positively endorsing the results of the Amsterdam treaty; and, thirdly, as Britain prepares to take on the presidency of the European Union, it is clear that we want to play a leading and constructive role at the heart of the Union. From those three facts, it is clear that Britain has come in from the cold and we are witnessing the most positive, pro-European stance by a British Government for 20 years. That is to be welcomed.

The Amsterdam treaty is, in large part, good for Europe, and it is a good deal for Britain. Seen in the context of the general election campaign, it puts into sharp relief some of the comments by Conservative candidates who tried to claim that the only person who could be trusted to negotiate for Britain at Amsterdam was the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). It is ironic that, when the Conservative party seeks to attack its political opponents, it focuses on an area—leadership and negotiating skills in Europe—that serves to highlight its own weakness and divisions.

The treaty is to be welcomed, because it is based on the recognition that the European Union will enlarge and that, once it has 21 or nearly 30 member countries, the

idea that it can continue with a decision-making structure that was originally designed for only six countries is unsustainable—we would be dictated to by the nation that wanted to proceed at the slowest pace, and constantly prey to the threat of blackmail.

That is why I welcome the extension of qualified majority voting encapsulated within the treaty. Why should one country on its own be able to block moves towards combating fraud or opening up European decision-making procedures, to make them more transparent?

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is simple. At the 1975 referendum, when two out of three people endorsed our continued membership of the European Community, the booklet, "Britain's new deal in Europe", which was issued by the Labour Government, specifically guaranteed that, if a British Minister objected to any legislation within Europe, that would be the end of the legislation. If the Government are to take us down a different road, they should at least have the courtesy to revisit the British electorate.

Mr. Rammell: Why, then, did not the former Prime Minister, Baroness Thatcher, take a similar route when she signed up to the Single European Act 1985? Clearly, we are dealing with a very different Conservative party today from the one in the 1980s.

Qualified majority voting will help us on the issues that I highlighted. It would be foolish to pretend that we would always win every argument in Europe, but I am certain that the pros will outweigh the cons. That is life. Whether it is in the workplace, business, government or politics, one sometimes wins and one sometimes loses. Sometimes one must negotiate and trade to proceed on the matters that are more important than others. That is how one makes progress in life, and it is how we shall make progress in Europe.

The treaty enshrines the concept of subsidiarity more clearly than ever before. After Amsterdam, Community action will be justified only when more can be achieved together than alone, but also when action cannot be achieved by a member state acting alone. That is not federalism; it retains sovereignty where it can be effective and pools it where significantly more can be achieved together than alone.

The treaty also improves the scrutiny process, so that national Parliaments and the people they represent can better understand and influence what the European Union does. I welcome the protocol setting out the six-week delay between the tabling of proposed legislation and its being placed on the Council agenda for decision. I also welcome the fact that Council decisions will now be published.

I hope that Britain will use its European Union presidency to take a lead and change the way in which the House scrutinises European legislation and makes decisions. Although improvements have been made, we need faster depositing of European documents in Parliament. We also need to extend the practice of Ministers appearing before Select Committees in advance of Council of Ministers meetings, and, in some cases, giving written reports on their return. The system should also be reformed so that pillars 2 and 3 come under the scrutiny process. Furthermore, if votes at Council meetings are to be made public, the overall proceedings should be made public and televised. In that respect, I agree with the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies).

All those moves are designed to open up Europe and to open up the decision-making process. They will be widely welcomed, because the reason why people are sometimes suspicious and fearful of Europe is not that they are intrinsically anti-European but that they simply do not understand what is happening and how decisions are made. Post-Amsterdam, the solution to that problem is in our hands.

I welcome the fact that the treaty makes it clear that the European Union, post-Amsterdam, is not just a financial or business union; it is a people's union. The priority given to job creation within the treaty is long overdue. The co-ordination of employment strategies, the dissemination of best job-creating practices and the small incentive programmes that go with that are to be welcomed. That should not be simply a fig leaf, but this country should give practical support, through our Government and in the Councils of Europe, to that job-creating process.

Flexibility within the labour market will be part of the solution, but not the whole solution. Growth is already returning across the European Union, yet it is not matched by rising employment. Employment flexibility without higher employment levels is not sustainable in the long run and will not be supported by people in this country and elsewhere.

I am pleased that the treaty addresses the quality of employment as well as the number of jobs. I am delighted and proud that this Government have at long last signed the European social chapter. Arguments against the social chapter have always been exaggerated, and our arguments in its favour should not simply be defensive. In a global economy, the opportunity for unscrupulous exploitation of working people should be resisted, and we should do everything possible, through the social chapter and other mechanisms, to create minimum employment standards and fairness.

On the down side, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and others have said, a significant concern is the treaty's failure fully to face up to the need for institutional reform before enlargement. The Commission cannot continue to grow whenever a new nation applies for membership. The weighting of Council votes to represent population size more effectively must be addressed. As the Foreign Secretary said, it is absurd and unsustainable that, under the current rules—certainly under qualified majority voting—countries that represent a majority of the European population could not mount enough votes to block a proposal.

If Europe is to enlarge, that cannot be allowed to continue. While I recognise the negotiating constraints in that respect, I urge the Government to make the problem a high priority for urgent and early resolution, otherwise that factor will be used by those who oppose enlargement to block enlargement unfairly and unnecessarily.

I also welcome other measures in the treaty, such as the fact that our veto on the key issues of changes to the treaty, the budget, foreign and security policy, taxation and social security has been maintained. I say loudly and clearly to the Euro-sceptic siren voices that

[Mr. Rammell]

persistently and misleadingly claim that, after Amsterdam, the European Union will take taxation policies out of our hands: nothing in the treaty sustains that argument.

I shall now deal with some of the attacks on the treaty by Conservative Members. First, the shadow Foreign Secretary attacked my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary for his supposed lack of diplomacy and for offending officials. That was certainly amusing, but given his stewardship of the Prison Service and his relationship with some of its officials, those comments lacked credibility, to say the least.

Although I disagreed with the comments of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who said that it was not simply a question of what happened in Amsterdam but that one needed to judge the whole train and flow of summits, treaties and decision making within Europe, I could respect the manner in which he put forward the argument. It was in stark contrast to the comments of some Conservative Members, both today and previously, who talk apocalyptically about the future of the nation state. That serves neither our debate nor the public debate, which, as we move towards a debate on the single currency, will be absolutely necessary to get to the heart of the issue, so that people are properly informed about what is at stake.

I was interested to hear the concern expressed about the penalties that can be used against nations involved in serious and persistent violations of human rights. As a democratically elected politician, I should be appalled to conceive of circumstances in which all 14 other member states of the EU believed Britain to be involved in serious and persistent violations of human rights, and we did not recognise that fact.

The Conservative approach to that scenario almost seems to be that we should be able to behave in whatever way we wish. That is neither helpful nor constructive. The new rules on their own may not have made a difference, but if their existence in the future and the pressure that they would bring to bear made it less likely, for example, that trade unions would be banned at GCHQ, or that section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 would be imposed, that should be welcomed.

We have heard from the shadow Foreign Secretary and others their concern about the extension of qualified majority voting. Before the debate, I looked through copies of *Hansard* from around the time of the Single European Act 1985. That represented a significant advance in QMV. I was intrigued to discover that in the six months following that treaty, not once in Prime Minister's questions was the issue of QMV raised. That is a strong indication that the argument against QMV is a cloak for the arguments of Euro-scepticism. It shows that the present Conservative party is very different from the one that existed in the 1980s and earlier.

The Opposition say that they will vote against the Bill. No reasonable person, having listened to the debate, read the treaty and considered what is at stake, would vote against the treaty. Had the present Opposition been re-elected at the general election, they would have brought back from Amsterdam broadly the same deal as we brought back. Their tactics were aptly summed up by the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). Asked recently about his attitude to the prospect of the Conservative party voting against the Amsterdam treaty, he said:

"I don't think anybody would take us seriously."

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was right. No reasonable person would take Conservative Members seriously, having seen their tactics in the debate. It is not what they would have done, were they still in government. The treaty is good for Britain and good for Europe, and should be supported.

7.7 pm

Sir Richard Body (Boston and Skegness): I thought I heard the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) say that no reasonable person could oppose the treaty. If that is so, perhaps he would agree that no reasonable person would speak of a European Community—still less of Europe—unless the institutions being established in its name were trying sincerely to embrace the whole of Europe.

The hon. Gentleman would agree that Europe consists of some 40 states. It is my dream that the European Community should one day be able to embrace them all, but surely the hon. Gentleman would agree that the treaty will not do that. We should judge this treaty or any other concerning the European Community according to whether it will make it easier or harder to enlarge the Community, so that it can truly speak of Europe and unite all Europe.

The vision began a long time ago, and at that time I shared the vision and supported the European Community in the hope that it would bring the countries of western Europe together so that there should never be another war. Surely the task now should be to bring east and western Europe together, so that we can be a truly united continent, and not suffer the consequences that might follow if any kind of cold war should re-emerge.

When we debated—as we did at great length—the Maastricht treaty, we heard much about the principle of subsidiarity. Those of us who were a little sceptical about it were told to wait and see. We were assured that everything would be all right, and that we would be able to claw back many of the powers that had gone to Brussels. We were even assured that about 25 per cent. of the Community law would be repealed or could be amended.

I stand to be corrected, but I do not think that in the past few years any of the Community law has been repealed or amended as a result of the Maastricht treaty. It has been a disappointment to us. Some of us hoped that, when negotiations took place on the Amsterdam treaty, we could put teeth into the principle of subsidiarity. Surely it is self-evident that there can be no hope of a true European Community unless the principle of subsidiarity is made to work.

Instead of the principle being made to work at Amsterdam, we have a protocol, and paragraph 2 invokes the doctrine of acquis communautaire, which, as we all know, means that competence once given to Brussels cannot be taken away from Brussels. It means that all the powers that we handed over at Maastricht, in addition to all those that we handed over in the original treaty of Rome, and now further powers in the treaty of Amsterdam, cannot come back.

I ask the hon. Member for Harlow to consider the effect that that will have on the countries of eastern Europe that sincerely wish to join the European Community. It will not make it easier for them; it will make it much more difficult. I beg the hon. Gentleman to look again at the Maastricht treaty and see how far it goes and the extent to which it could impinge on the policies that so many eastern European countries are trying to pursue. He will see that those cannot be reconciled.

The protocol is bad enough, but declaration 43 contains some sort of definition of subsidiarity.

Mr. Casale: Does the hon. Gentleman know of a single country in eastern Europe that is opposed to the Amsterdam treaty?

Sir Richard Body: I doubt whether the Governments of those countries have got round to reading the treaty, but when they do, I have no doubt—if it is not presumptuous to say so—that they will agree with what I said. We shall see.

Declaration 43 gives a definition of subsidiarity. It states that member states will be responsible for administering Community law. That is a kind of subsidiarity, but not the kind that we argued about in the Maastricht debates, which we thought meant that individual countries could do those things that they are best able to do.

Let me give an example: fishing, which was discussed at Amsterdam. If anyone believes that the fishermen on the east coast of England and Scotland who go out to fish in the North sea are not capable of agreeing to a policy laid down by our own Government, as was the case in the past, to preserve the fish stocks, the fishermen in my constituency could explain that, if the present common fisheries policy goes on, they have few prospects of being able to earn a livelihood in a few years.

I was glad that the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats and who has fishermen in his constituency, went so far as to say that he agrees with all European Community legislation. That includes all the regulations that constitute the common fisheries policy—I hope that the fishermen in his constituency will appreciate that view. The next time the hon. and learned Gentleman meets those fishermen, he will no doubt explain what an excellent idea the common fisheries policy is.

The declaration superimposed on the protocol is not only a denial of the principle of subsidiarity that we hoped to see, but strikes at the federal principle. Federalists will agree that we cannot have a federal system without meaningful subsidiarity. The Amsterdam treaty has resulted in a move towards a unitary state. That is much more dangerous than a federal system, and I think that we should be alert to that movement. Unless a subsequent treaty enshrines the principle of subsidiarity, makes it a working principle and puts some force behind it, there can be no hope of achieving the kind of European Community that Conservative Members wish to see: a Community that embraces many more countries in Europe and truly speaks for Europe.

7.11 pm

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): On Monday, I had the pleasure of addressing the House in my maiden speech as a Londoner, and today I make no apologies for speaking as both a British patriot and a European. I listened carefully to the speech by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), who referred in one breath to "Europe" and, in the next, to "over there". I do not wish to give geography lessons in the House, but I must point out that, although Europe is over there, it is over here also. We are part of Europe, and I am happy to identify myself with Europe and with the European continent.

My point is that those three identities—being a Londoner, a Briton and a European—are not incompatible, but complement each other. That reflects today's reality: we are citizens of our locality, of our region, our country and of Europe as a whole. That reality is also reflected in the Amsterdam treaty itself.

British interests—those of the British people and of Britain as a whole—are protected by the treaty. The end of the opt-out on social policy secures the interests of British working people by guaranteeing them basic minimum rights and freedoms at their place of work. As a condition of access to the wider European market, the treaty also sets in motion a process by which those freedoms and rights can be enhanced progressively. As it does so, in partnership not only with our European neighbours at a national level but through the process of a social dialogue between employers' federations and trade unions, we can be sure that social progress will not be bought at the cost of our competitiveness—indeed, our competitiveness will be enhanced. That is why I believe Commissioner Leon Brittan who, in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* today, said:

"I therefore consider that the social chapter no longer poses the serious threat"—

implicitly to jobs—

"that it once did."

Through the social dialogue, Britain is anchored to a rolling democratic debate about the future of Europe's economy and society. That debate will explore what kind of Europe we want to live in: a Europe of low-value, low-paid, low-skilled jobs or a Europe that develops the resourcefulness and potential of its people to the full.

Anchoring it in the Amsterdam treaty means that the social dialogue will be extended to atypical workers—part-time and temporary workers—who will also feel the benefit of those rights and freedoms. That will improve the quality of life of thousands of people in my constituency, especially many of those who have young families and who are in temporary or part-time work. They will benefit from the social dialogue and from the right to parental leave that is enshrined in the social chapter. Those are some of the first fruits of Britain's accession to the social chapter.

Those Conservative Members who believe that what is in the interests of British working people automatically cannot be in the interests of Britain as a whole should ask themselves whether they are failing in their representative function in some way. Perhaps they should reflect on the results of the 1 May election, which demonstrate that point quite well.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I do not wish to be rude to the hon. Gentleman or to use unparliamentary

[Mr. Keith Simpson]

language. However, when we narrow it down to factual cases, there is a degree of claptrap in his comments—particularly those concerning the social chapter.

Firstly, many constituencies, particularly my constituency of Mid-Norfolk, include dozens of very small businesses: those employing fewer than five people. The imposition of bureaucracy across the board from national Governments—I admit that that occurs—and from European legislation will mean ultimately that many companies will have to employ fewer people or go bankrupt. There is much generalisation about this issue, but we are talking about an imposition on dozens of small firms who must fight to retain employment. I am sorry that, when we get down to specifics rather than broad generalisations, the hon. Gentleman is in error.

Secondly—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I think that "firstly" will do.

Mr. Casale: I share the hon. Gentleman's desire to see debate being conducted politely, and I assure him that "claptrap" is not a term that I would use. Numerous studies have highlighted the benefits of social dialogue. They have identified it as a means of providing the important rights which I have described—including security for working people—and as a route to higher productivity through good relations in the workplace.

I welcome the emphasis on jobs and employment in the Amsterdam treaty. The Government are committed to creating employment for young people—and there is a high level of commitment to that goal in my constituency also. It seems right and proper to establish mechanisms and a framework that enable us to work with our European partners to increase employment in Europe.

The Amsterdam treaty reaffirms that the European Union must create jobs for the peoples of Europe. It also reaffirms the priority of employment creation which was set at the Essen summit in 1994. It anchors that commitment to employment in a new employment chapter and to a rolling debate in the Council of Europe. The jobs summit to be held this month will take that process further forward.

It is in the interests of the British people to build a people's Europe and, to that extent, I welcome the Amsterdam treaty's emphasis on openness and transparency. I welcome also the increased accountability of European bureaucrats and of decisions taken by qualified majority voting in the Council which is reflected in the increased powers given to the European Parliament in the area of co-decision making. I refer again to the comments of Commissioner Brittan, who, in his article this morning, said that this extension of co-decision making was the right way to go.

I welcome the renewed emphasis on European citizenship and remind the House that, as a result of the single market and the freedom of movement that it allows, a very large number of European nationals live in Britain today. I welcome the fact that they will be able to participate fully as citizens in the local elections and in the London referendum next May. When talking about European citizenship, it is important to emphasise that, although the treaty states that European citizenship is important and that it should complement national citizenship, perhaps more can be done to enforce the rights of European citizens, in particular with regard to voting in local and European elections. Perhaps it would be wise for the Government to see whether there is some possibility of a national campaign to make those rights more widely known to the large community of European nationals in this country, so that those rights can be exercised to the full.

Sir Leon Brittan recognises that Europe needs to be outward-looking. It needs to be a major player on the world stage—an objective which we must all keep in mind at the present time. That objective was taken forward by the Amsterdam treaty, while setting a benchmark for standards and values that must be shared by the countries of eastern and central Europe that are seeking to join the European Union at a later date. The treaty emphasises once again the important continuing role that the European Union plays in ensuring stability and international peace.

In many ways—culturally, historically and geographically—despite the comments of the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, we are part of Europe.

Mrs. Browning: I represent a Devon seat. It is not uncommon for those of us who live close to the English channel to refer to the other side as "over there".

Mr. Casale: It is also not uncommon for many people to complain about the people living over there, and then in the summertime to jump on a ferry at Plymouth and go off to France or other places in Europe to enjoy their holidays.

We must recognise that we are part of Europe, that we must work with Europe constructively, and the Amsterdam treaty—I congratulate and applaud the Government on the way in which they negotiated it—is a vital part of that process.

It is time that we sent a positive signal from this place to our European partners—one that says that we want to work together to construct a strong and stable Europe, a Europe fit for the peoples of Europe with their proud and diverse traditions, a Europe based on shared values, decent standards in the workplace, a Europe actively working to create jobs.

We have to negotiate hard in Europe, and the Government have shown that they will not fail in that respect. However, to negotiate, we have to speak the same language as those with whom we are negotiating. As a Londoner and a Brit, I say to our Italian colleagues, "Facciamo l'Europa insieme"—let us construct Europe together. To our German counterparts, I say, "Wir machen mit"—we want to work with you. I applaud the substantial achievements of the new Government in securing British interests in the Amsterdam treaty. I commend the treaty to the House.

7.23 pm

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. Like other hon. Members, I have detected a difference in the tone of the speeches being made today. Those of us who still bear the scars of the passage of the Maastricht treaty realise that, although we have heard some pretty sceptical comments from hon. Opposition Members, they cannot summon up

the same passion against the Amsterdam treaty. That perhaps explains why many hon. Members have argued tonight that the Amsterdam treaty is a fairly modest step on the European road.

Two former Ministers have argued passionately against the Amsterdam treaty, saying that it is another incremental approach on the road to greater European Union, but they sat in a Government who passed the Maastricht treaty. We can value their speeches, but bearing in mind that Maastricht took us further down the road to European integration than Amsterdam ever could, how could they have sat in that Government with a quiet conscience?

I shall go further: those of us who have followed our European debates will have recognised that Maastricht was a significant milestone on the road to greater European Union. I fully supported that approach. We had many vigorous debates in the House about it.

It is good to remind ourselves that Maastricht happened at a particular time in European history: at the end of the cold war and when the Berlin wall came down. We recognised that the European Union, as it became, needed to consider some of the political implications of greater European co-operation—an issue that Europe had largely forgotten since the catastrophic failure to come together in the 1950s. A draft of a common European defence policy came before the treaty of Rome. We all understand why it was such a catastrophic failure.

After the cold war, after the opening of new relationships in Europe, it was right that the European Community considered what that new partnership should be. Maastricht was a first attempt to look at some of the political implications, with the creation of the two pillars—foreign affairs and defence, and home affairs and justice.

Some of us argued, even during the Maastricht debates, that the creation of those pillars would set up bodies that would be difficult to organise. The common foreign and defence policy had no permanent secretariat, so when Ministers from each member state met to discuss foreign policy, the meetings would often have no coherence and no focus, and a subsequent meeting would often go over the same ground as the previous one.

One of the issues that brought home to me the failure of the intergovernmental approach was our experience during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. We can argue why Europe failed to deal properly with that conflict, but because of a lack of a common approach on foreign policy, individual member states recognised parts of the former Yugoslavia unilaterally. Germany recognised some states. The United Kingdom and France disagreed with that and later considered other forms of recognition.

While Europe was standing idly by, watching the conflict develop, the awful phrase ethnic cleansing entered the dictionary and our consciousness. The failure of the European Union to deal with that conflict properly is a stain on our collective conscience. Europe failed the people of the former Yugoslavia because we had no collective, coherent approach.

Although I disagree with many of the points that have been made tonight by hon. Members who will oppose the treaty—I do not believe that we should be looking for a common defence policy in the traditional sense—there are areas in which we can co-operate. It was a mistake not to take at Amsterdam that little step further in terms of the Petersburg tasks in the European Union. I believe that it would have been perfectly possible, within the treaty, to accept the European tasks as the only basis on which we should have European co-operation under the collective NATO umbrella. In my view, the experience of the former Yugoslavia is a lesson that we failed to learn in Amsterdam.

Mr. Keith Simpson: Can the hon. Gentleman explain how, if there had been some form of common foreign policy, we would, in practical terms, have squared the very different but heartfelt approaches of the German Government and our Government?

Mr. Jones: The real problem was that there was no concerted European action at the outset. The message driven home to the conflicting parties in the former Yugoslavia was that Europe could take no concerted action. The problem then was that conflict spilled from region to region in the former Yugoslavia because those involved knew that there would be no concerted European action against them.

I believe that it was a mistake for the Germans to recognise one part of the former Yugoslavia so quickly. That, too, gave them the feeling that there would be no European intervention. I believe that it is necessary for us, on occasion, to come together to deal with conflict on our own borders. I also believe that it is very important for us to recognise that the people of Europe are now demanding greater democracy, greater openness and greater accountability in the institutions of the European Union.

We must recognise that elements of the Maastricht treaty went ahead of public opinion in Europe. We needed to take stock in Amsterdam; the problem with the Amsterdam treaty is that it failed to tackle the fundamental issue—the fact that, while we have democratic institutions in the European Union, there is a failure to give it democratic accountability and legitimacy.

The difficulty is that, although Members of Parliament and people elsewhere argue that power is being transferred to unelected bureaucrats and unaccountable bankers in Europe, people using what amount to the same argument say that we should not give more powers to the European Parliament. They cannot have it both ways. If we believe in democracy and accountability, the European Parliament is the vehicle to deliver that—in part.

We should welcome the fact that the European Parliament is given more powers of co-decision. We are streamlining the legislative process there and making it easier for decisions to be reached between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. I consider that a worthwhile measure in the Amsterdam treaty.

I also believe that the argument about qualified majority voting is being used politically by the opponents of further European integration. I understand the frustration of Ministers who must go to the European Union to argue the case—points are being argued in a different way in the House—but, in international negotiations, it is always a question of a trade-off. It is a question of reaching alliances with other people. It is not always a case of sticking to a veto, of standing isolated and thinking that that will confer benefits; we must always consider ways of reaching an accommodation with those with whom we are negotiating.

[Mr. Jones]

I live on the island of Anglesey, which is very close to the Republic of Ireland. I know the way in which the people of the Republic have negotiated their way into the European Union—to their immense benefit. When I look today at the gross domestic product per head of people in Southern Ireland and that of people in west Wales, I know who has had the best deal out of the European Union and the negotiations during the past 20 years or so. It certainly is not the people of west Wales: it is the people of Ireland, who have negotiated considerable benefits for themselves.

My final point is very important. At any rate, it is important for me—representing Plaid Cymru in the debate—to mention subsidiarity. I listened carefully to what Conservative Members said about the need for subsidiarity to be meaningful. I could sympathise more with that line of argument if they accepted subsidiarity in its true European sense, which is that there are different levels of decision-making for different purposes. There is, of course, the European Union level; there is the level of the member state; and there is the level of the regions and nations of Europe.

I recognise that this Government have broken with that traditional Conservative view of subsidiarity and recognised that subsidiarity must drive decisions below the level of the member state. I very much welcome the fact that the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament will be a living embodiment of subsidiarity in the new Europe. I also recognise the importance of the regional dimension in the European Union. That is why I am pleased that the Committee of the Regions is to be given more responsibility under the treaty—although, obviously, I would have preferred it to have more powers.

Amsterdam represented a very small step along the European road. Some benefits will accrue. I do not think that the treaty went far enough, especially in opening up and reforming the institutions; but I will vote in favour of it tonight because I think that it should be recognised that, without this movement along the road, enlargement cannot happen. Certainly the treaty does not pave the way for enlargement to be completed, but I think that it opens an important door.

7.36 pm

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): As with all the past debates on treaties such as this, it is interesting to note—or would be, if we were allowed to look—that the Public Gallery is largely empty and the Press Gallery totally empty.

Let me say—particularly to the new Labour Member who has just spoken, the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale)—that I hope that it will be borne in mind that all these treaties have gone through with the same assurances and the same optimism on the part of those on the Front Bench. The one thing that encourages Conservative Members is seeing the large range of new, talented, able and patriotic Conservative Members who have just arrived in the House, and who, I think, will for the first time win a new and stimulating battle for democracy and patriotism.

Let me say this to those who have doubts about the optimism expressed by the Government. I wish that they would look through the assurances that were given about all the earlier treaties. I well remember the treaty of Rome, many years ago: sadly, I had to resign from Mr. Heath's Government, weakening it amazingly by so doing. We were told at that time that all that the treaty achieved was free trade and friendship. There was no question of taking away our liberty, no question of taking away our freedom, no question of its costing us—and, at least if we sat around the table like sensible and adult people, we would be able to change some of the small problems that Europe had, such as the common agricultural policy. We were told to be positive and optimistic, as the Foreign Secretary is always telling us to be; but, in fact, the arrangement turned out to be something wholly different.

Then we had the Single European Act. Again, we were told that the Act was not like the treaty of Rome at all. It was accepted at that time that the treaty of Rome had been a big thing, but a former Prime Minister, who I think is now in the House of Lords—a delightful lady—assured me in her own office that I should not worry about the majority voting powers, which she said could be used only for free trade. I remember her pointing at me—as she often did—and saying, "Now, Teddy, you are in favour of free trade." I said, "Yes." She said, "I am in favour of free trade, and the only thing that the majority voting powers do is facilitate free trade in Europe." That did not entirely prove to be the case, because the Single European Act constituted a massive transfer of power.

Then we had the Maastricht treaty. I am afraid that some of our older colleagues, who are not here tonight, voted for it—through a misunderstanding, no doubt. The plain fact is that we now know that the Maastricht treaty was a substantial treaty, although we were told that it was not. At that time, a Cabinet Minister kindly explained it to me in the Tea Room. He said, "Teddy, there are good things and bad things in the Maastricht treaty," and added that the good things applied to us whereas, because of the determination and courage of the then Prime Minister, we were exempt from the bad things. Sadly, it did not work out that way.

I caution the Minister, who is obviously optimistic and patriotic at the same time. I ask him please to remember that the same things have been said about all the treaties. We are always told that there is nothing much in them: "There are some nice things, so for goodness' sake let's be positive and constructive."

The Minister is obviously a person of ability and will be around for a long time. He should realise that every Prime Minister has started in the same way. They say, "Unlike my predecessor, I will be positive. I will sit round the table and co-operate with our European friends and will get the bad things changed." After they find out that that does not work, they become Euro-sceptic. I do not want to bash the Government, but I am scared that we are going through the same process again. Every time we have a new Prime Minister, we give another load of power and responsibility to Europe, and we all suffer as a consequence.

We were told that the treaty of Rome was vital for the improvement of Britain's trade. With the help of the staff in the Library, who are more truthful than party politicians tend to be, I obtained detailed figures on what has happened since we began signing these treaties. Has our trade with Europe greatly improved? The official figures may horrify some new Members, although most of them will be aware of them already. The deficit in our trade with Europe since we joined that organisation has been

more than £100 billion. Before we joined the EEC, we often had a positive balance of trade, but since we have joined we have had the horrendous loss of more than £100 billion.

We were told that the contributions were being sorted out; that we were to get big repayments; that things would be better. I asked the Library for the official figures. They may shock people with a number of children. We have had to pay into Europe £1,500 each. I happen to be a normal person with a delightful wife and three children, so for us the figure is £7,500. We have handed that money to Europe, and some of it has come back largely to be used for silly things such as the destruction of food. More money is wasted, while we pour a great deal of cash into Europe.

We also have the common agricultural policy. Although I would never question anyone's integrity, I sometimes worry when Ministers—inadvertently, I am sure—give figures for what the CAP is costing expressed in ecu when the pound is weak and in pounds when the pound is strong.

Mr. MacShane: It will be the euro soon.

Sir Teddy Taylor: The hon. Gentleman should not laugh. I am sure that many poor people in his constituency need help from the Government, whether Tory or Labour. What do they think about the fact that, because of the mad Euro-policies that have been adopted this year, £1,200 million has been spent on growing high-class tobacco in Greece, which has then been dumped on the third world or destroyed. That is an awful lot of money. With £1,200 million I could do an awful lot for the hon. Gentleman's constituents and others. The arrogant way in which he deals with these matters, smiling and laughing at stories of spending, is shameful democracy. I would say the same to any Conservative Member. It is not funny. We should all be ashamed of the fact that hundreds of millions of pounds are wasted on the destruction of food simply to maintain high prices.

We should be careful about spreading more power under the treaties. I am sure that the Foreign Secretary would accept that the Amsterdam treaty contains less than the Commission sought. The difficulty that Governments face every time is that many proposals are made and we battle hard to get some of them removed, so there are fewer than we started with. In view of the amount of unemployment, misery, waste, extravagance and fraud in Europe, at some stage a United Kingdom Government should say, "Not one more treaty. Not one more addition of power to this ridiculous enterprise". We must simply say no. If the consequence is that other member countries say that they do not want Britain any more, we shall have to put up with it.

The Government have decided to adopt the social chapter. That has been referred to as giving people additional rights. I appeal to hon. Members to think about what will happen if it goes wrong. What will happen if we pass laws that turn out to destroy and not safeguard jobs? What the blazes could we do about it? The answer is nothing. We have seen the death of democracy, because laws have been passed about which we can do nothing. The basic flaw is that, if we hand over powers and they are used in Europe, we cannot undo them.

There is also the employment charter. Given the misery and massive unemployment in almost all the other countries of the European Union, why on earth should we add to our problems by inflicting on this country the policies that they have inflicted on themselves?

Many decisions taken by majority voting will be damaging. The Foreign Secretary referred to just one: it is tiny. Article 13, formerly article 6a, on page 138 of the treaty, worries the Christian Church, employers and many other people. The Foreign Secretary said that it would allow the Council to introduce new policies to combat discrimination based on racial and ethnic origin and disability, and that that was important. He did not complete the article because of the shortage of time. It refers to discrimination based on sex, racial origin, religion, disability, age or sexual orientation. What the blazes does "sexual orientation" mean? I do not know, and the Foreign Secretary obviously does not know. The only people who know are the people in the European Court of Justice. Could the European Court of Justice make decisions on this matter?

Christian Action, Research and Education wrote to the Government to express its concern. It appreciated that these powers are new, but it wanted to know what would happen in the meantime, and whether the article could be used for actions in the European Court of Justice. It received a lovely letter from the Foreign Office dated 7 July 1997, saying that, although the writer

"would not expect litigation to arise",

one could never rule it out.

We have previously been told that nothing would happen and that no cases would emerge, but we have had some appalling decisions. The Grogan judgment in 1991 had a devastating effect on the Republic of Ireland, and the decision on Cornwall in 1994 concerned someone who had changed sex. If the European Court of Justice wants, as I believe it does, to change the decisions we make in the employment of people in our Church schools, in churches and elsewhere, our law will be thrown out of the window and there will be nothing that we can do about it.

The Government should have tried to do something about the European Court of Justice. Everyone can understand the need for a court to interpret the law, but that is totally different from a court that seems to be concerned only with extending the powers of the European Union and its institutions. It is a political court, although not biased towards one party or another. Its sole objective seems to be to extend the powers of the European Union.

We should have done something about the agricultural policy, which is the biggest protection racket ever invented by man. It creates the most appalling surpluses and the most dreadful expenditure. The agricultural community, which forms a large part of my new constituency, is rather embarrassed about it, because it appreciates that, if we put all the money on a British-made aeroplane and dropped £10 notes at random, people would be much better off. Why could not the Government do something about it, given that new powers are being created?

The previous Government and the new Government have told us repeatedly that reforms are coming, and that there will be cuts in spending. I remember the last cuts and reductions that were coming. We had to give compensation in lieu, and area payments were introduced.

[Sir Teddy Taylor]

Those payments were enormous and, in two cases, the prices never fell, but increased. It has become the largest protection racket ever invented. Someone must have the courage to face up to it. We know that there is no agreement in Europe to do that, because all our democratic institutions are terrified of the agricultural community. Most hon. Members would rather sweep European business aside, not talk about it and not attend debates, but we have got to do something. We do something when Europe wants either more powers or more cash.

My biggest worry is that, because of the ever-increasing power that we are giving to Europe and because of the Government's new determination on the single currency, people are not thinking through where we are going. There is not the slightest doubt that, in view of this further significant transfer of sovereignty, and if we enter a single market, it will be the effective death of democracy, in this country and in others. What should worry us most is that, around the world, not one artificial federation without democracy has survived. They always break up, usually with violence. In addition, no independent country that I am aware of exists without its own currency or the control of its economy.

We often try to reassure ourselves with slogans. The slogan of the previous Government was that they were opposed to a federal Europe. It was the silliest slogan that I had ever heard, because a federal Europe would have been infinitely stronger, better and more democratic than what we have now. At least there would be some guarantee for member states' powers. We are rapidly going towards a single European state without democracy, which, on the basis of every previous experiment with the harmonisation of currencies, will create unemployment and misery.

Let us consider the gold standard, the poor countries in south-east Asia that have benefited in some way by linking their currencies to the dollar and now find themselves in a terrible mess, and our experience with the exchange rate mechanism, when all the clever people—such as the bankers, the lawyers and the stupid Confederation of British Industry—said that there would be growth and stability. The plain fact is that they were totally wrong.

I hope, therefore, that the Government will think carefully. To achieve a small move in the right direction, the best action that we can take is to reject this treaty and then, when our friends in Europe say, "What shall we do now?", give them some good suggestions. I hope that the House will remember that every previous treaty has turned out to be much worse than we thought. I hope also that, at some stage, we will have the courage, first, to attend these debates, secondly, to think about Europe and, thirdly, to say no, as we should have done a long time ago.

7.51 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am a little disappointed—not by the quality of the speeches, of course, but by the lack of passion, in the debate. I had been led to believe that European issues in the House tended to generate more interest and excitement than has been displayed by hon. Members on both sides of the House so far. I wonder whether Labour Members are taking part in a subtle process of de-escalation on the subject of the Amsterdam treaty.

In the advance billing, and after the Prime Minister's triumphant return from Amsterdam, we were led to believe that this was a triumph for British diplomacy—we had a deal with which the Government were exceptionally pleased, which had fulfilled their wildest dreams, and of which the country should be proud. The contributions from Labour Members so far have given the overwhelming sense that nothing could be further from the truth. They are almost falling over themselves to explain how modest the proposals are—it is the apotheosis of modesty in some ways. I wonder why that should be.

Equally, I hear the comments from the shadow Foreign Secretary and his colleagues. Again, in earlier exchanges on the Amsterdam treaty, we were led to believe that it was of earth-shattering importance, that it would have a disastrous effect on Britain and would lead to the end of the British state as we know it, and that crazed Belgians would be running in our streets, unfettered by British law and order; yet this evening we have not heard those blood-chilling tales from Conservative Members. We have heard nothing about the referendum, which was promised as a necessary part of the process. The shadow Foreign Secretary is normally good at chilling the blood. Why has he not performed in that way this evening?

We have had the spectacle of Conservative Members saying what was good about the Amsterdam treaty and how much they agreed with so many of its provisions, working themselves up to what could be their only conclusion—that they support the Bill—but, when they got to their last sentence, remembering that it included the social chapter and saying that they would vote against it. It has not been an entirely convincing performance.

The reality is that this is an ordinary treaty, with modest consequences. It moves us slightly in a direction in which many hon. Members would wish us to move. It was a largely workmanlike performance by the Government in Amsterdam, until perhaps about 3 o'clock in the morning, when it seems to have fallen apart a little. Perhaps the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, will shed yet more light on how that happened. Perhaps even an apology to the House may be forthcoming, I do not know. On the whole, however, this is a modest Bill, with modest intentions, modestly achieved—a Bill that we can modestly support.

The tragedy is what is not there. As a result of the negotiations, the new agenda for Europe that some of us would argue now needs to be put in place has not been pursued. That agenda would take us towards a genuine democratisation of Europe, genuine transparency and genuine accountability for Europe. The agenda would enable those countries seeking accession to have some chance of success, because they cannot accede without major reforms to the CAP and to structural policies.

The fact that that process has not even begun means that further intergovernmental conferences and treaties are ahead. That process cannot start soon enough. The common fisheries policy has been mentioned. I think that it is fairly well known that Liberal Democrats believe that it must be not just reformed, but replaced with a more acceptable alternative.

There is an agenda that talks about a recognition of cultural diversity throughout Europe, about genuine subsidiarity and about the elimination of duplication and

waste, and that gets rid of some of the nonsense within the EU and its institutions. None of that agenda has been addressed by the Amsterdam process.

If I say those things, I run the risk of what happened to me last week, when we were debating the test ban treaty. After I had said how much I agreed with the Government and with the Bill, and after I had congratulated him on bringing the matter before the House so promptly, the Minister of State said that I had been churlish. I did not feel that I had been churlish. I do not know how much one has to congratulate the Government before one is not accused of being churlish.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The hon. Gentleman has to join them.

Mr. Heath: Perhaps that is so, but even that may not be enough.

Let us therefore talk about some of the positive aspects of the Bill and the treaty that have not yet been addressed. There is a commitment to environmental objectives, which no one has yet mentioned. To have got that into the European framework is welcome, and I congratulate the negotiators. There is the commitment to remove discrimination against people with disabilities. I understand that that was largely a British initiative. That being the case, I congratulate Ministers on having achieved that welcome recognition. It raises the question: what happens next, and how that measure will improve the lives of people with disabilities. How will it be incorporated into British policy, and how do we see the next step forward? It must be accepted, however, that welcome steps have been taken.

Some specific items need to be considered as we move towards consideration of the Bill in Committee, and thereafter during its later stages. The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) talked about co-operation on security and policing. I speak with some interest in the subject, because I used to be a member of the standing committee of the national criminal intelligence service. It was an area that needed some co-operation if there were to be an effective fight against international crime, including stopping drug peddling across international frontiers and dealing with international fraud. There had to be a level of co-operation, and Europol provides us with an appropriate apparatus.

The measures in the treaty that will establish a better method of co-operation are welcome, but there is suspicion that the improvement in police co-operation will not be equalled by a new series of safeguards against abuse. I questioned the Foreign Secretary carefully on this issue, and it is still not clear to me that, when Europol officers are acting in support of national police forces, and within the territory of the United Kingdom in a supporting role, they are subject to any of the legal constraints that one would expect to be in place.

It is not clear to me also where the judicial control of the actions of Europol officers will be tested when it comes to liberty and proportionality. Why is that not a matter for the European Court of Justice? I did not hear a satisfactory reply to that question. Why is Britain not yet a signatory to the protocol on Europol?

It has been suggested outside the United Kingdom—I have heard it repeated—that Europol officers may have some immunity. I was told in answer to my questions that such immunity would be resisted by the Government. I hope that that is so. It would be improper for police officers engaged to Europol to have any immunity when dealing with matters of justice on United Kingdom territory. It is an area of concern, because there is a lack of clarity.

It may be said that police officers engaged to Europol cannot act in operational roles. Much depends, of course, on the definition of "operational". Such officers will be active in providing information, and in co-ordinating roles. They will be active in ways that could put British subjects at risk following the adverse consequences of their actions.

The new protocol on subsidiarity is a welcome addition to the acquis but—it is a big "but"—it remains to be seen how effective the protocol will be when implemented. It remains to be seen also whether there is any significance to be attached to the protocol when we move beyond the interface between the European Union as an entity and national Governments.

I believe that the Government espouse the principle—it is something that I should like to hear—that protocols should extend beyond the nation state, to regional and local levels, so that we have proper subsidiarity, thereby ensuring that matters are always dealt with at the lowest appropriate level unless there are overwhelming reasons for them to be taken at a higher level. That is the genuine meaning of subsidiarity, and one that is not often applied within the European Union or within Britain. It is a principle to which my colleagues and I subscribe, and one that we would wish to see made much more effective.

Oblique reference has been made to strengthening the powers of the Court of Auditors. It would surely be a welcome process. I imagine that the entire House feels that fraud within the Community should be reduced. It would be extraordinary if anyone in this place took a different view. The mechanisms must be provided, however, if that is to happen. I am worried because there is still a disconnection between actions taken by the Court of Auditors and national audit officers within member states. There is a connection that should be much more explicit, so that there is an audit trail that takes us from the origination of the sums involved to the proper destination.

At present, there is no such trail. Instead, there is a reliance on rather uneven audit arrangements between member states. I know that the issue is not easily negotiable within a summit, and will not find its way easily into a treaty. The Minister will probably say, "Look at what we have, which is much better than what we had before." That is true, but that does not stop us aspiring to a better and more complete system.

I agree with those who say that the Maastricht treaty was effectively the end of a process, and that the Amsterdam treaty is possibly the start of a new one. That remains to be seen. The days of the top-down elitist view of a Europe that decides what will happen and presents it as a fait accompli before the people of Europe is at an end.

People throughout the countries of Europe are becoming more questioning, and holding their Governments to account to a greater extent. When the people do not like what they hear, they are throwing out the proposals, and that is only right. We must reflect that attitude in the House and argue in support of it within the institutions of Europe.

[Mr. Heath]

We must argue for greater accountability, more transparency and more democracy. That will lead to the informed consent of the peoples of Europe, and it must be achieved before we see further moves in whatever direction. That which the European project has lacked so far is honesty about where we are, where we are going and where we expect to end up.

I hope that the Amsterdam treaty will represent a tiny step in the right direction. If that is what it proves to be, there is not the slightest reason why any Member of this place should not vote for the Bill, in the hope of a better system of government throughout the European Union in future years.

8.8 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I apologise for arriving in the Chamber somewhat late. I apologise also for not taking up the remarks of the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath). I think that the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm must be much diminished by the qualifications that he imposed on his endorsement of the treaty. He told us that it would have modest consequences and that it is largely workmanlike—I do not know which parts cannot be placed in that category. He told us also that we can modestly support it. The hon. Gentleman could have added that it is a modestly attended debate.

The Liberal Democrat party would accept whatever comes from Europe with gibbering gratitude, because that is its position. Europe for the Liberal Democrats is a religion rather than a matter of national interest or economic well-being. I am reminded of Lord Randolph Churchill's attack on Mr. Gladstone. There was a huge crowd of Liberal supporters watching the great statesman chop down trees on his estate at Hawarden. Those present watched him fell the trees in a frenzy of exertion. They were all given a chip of wood by the great man himself before they were led away. Lord Randolph said, "Here they come with major problems, but what about the Balkans? Chips. What about the economic situation? Chips. What about all the other problems? Chips." The Liberal party now has chips for Amsterdam. Presumably the Liberal party is grateful for the treaty, as the 19th-century Liberals were grateful for what they received.

The treaty is a curious document—all dressed up in a formal document, integrated with the previous treaties, but with nothing to say. It is an amazing document, putting me in two minds on what to say about it. It does things that I do not like, such as advancing federalism just a little bit along the road and fiddling various points. Some of those fiddles and fudges—especially those made late at night—deal with matters that should have been debated. Conversely, the treaty does not have much in it, and what it does contain is petty stuff.

The main indictment of the treaty is that it turns a quick blind eye to every problem. We have major problems with the common agricultural policy, and with what will happen with enlargement. We have major problems also with monetary union and with how to make any monetary union sensible. We shall have to consider in the convergence process some rational factors such as employment and growth. The treaty turns a blind eye to such matters.

So what does one do in considering the treaty? Does one consider the slight federal advance that the treaty provides, or the problems that it leaves unsolved? One must merely say that it is a pathetic treaty, which shows that the federal tide—which has concerned many hon. Members, and certainly me—is turning. That tide reached its height at Amsterdam, but the federalists cannot push it much further because they cannot reach agreement on any of the points that Amsterdam was supposed to deal with. The treaty treads water, being neither a new impetus to federalism nor, as we were told, the 3,000-mile or 5,000-mile service for the Maastricht treaty.

The treaty and its pathetic achievement makes it clear that there are increasing difficulties in reaching agreement and that forward movement has stalled. Currently the only dynamic is an old man in a hurry, which is a description not of Gladstone—the serried ranks of the Liberal Democrat party will be glad to hear—but of Chancellor Kohl.

Essentially, we are now waiting not for Godot but for the euro—which is the only game in town and the only way in which to progress a federal union. With the euro, federalists are trying to build a federal union from the top down. As they cannot get the consent of electorates in referendums or the consent of Governments—because Governments never agree; if they did, and one built something by Government agreement, one would build a camel—to build a federal union, they will build it by the back door. We shall agree on monetary union, and institutions to manage monetary union will follow. Institutions of a nation will follow.

The process of building a federal union is the opposite of what every other nation has done. The process will be disastrous, because it will use the currency and exchange rates as weapons of nation building. The process takes economic instruments and uses them as political instruments to build Europe, thus distorting the instruments' real purpose and function. That is, however, all that the federalists can do, because it is the only way forward. We are waiting to see whether they can move down that road, but I do not think that they can. The results will be messy, and possibly disastrous. Meanwhile, as we wait for the euro, everything else must tread water.

The Amsterdam treaty does not do very much. It does, however, shift various functions from the intergovernmental pillar to the central pillar of the Maastricht treaty. Justice and home affairs policy, for example, will move to the main pillar, and the Maastricht treaty's defence and security content will be extended by tying in the European Union and the Western European Union. In July—for some reason that I cannot understand—the WEU accepted that subordination.

In those senses, the Amsterdam treaty deepens the Union just a little bit—effectively establishing a European Foreign Office and diluting the importance of the Western European Union. As the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said, it also strengthens Europol—which is a type of Euro-FBI. An Elliot Ness character will probably arrive, tracking down fraud in the common agricultural policy. He will be serialised in some European drama, subsidised by the Commission and put on our screens. He could probably be called Elliot Mess if he was dealing with the CAP. The logical outcome must be "Europol versus the cows", offering all sorts of exciting prospects.

The treaty does not do much. One aspect that I do not like at all is that it allows states to merge specified functions—allowing a type of variable geometry. Moreover, any state that joins late must accept the agreements that have been concocted before it enters the new arrangement. I am very suspicious of that facet of the treaty, and I do not know what will come of it. I do not like it—primarily because it will extend the role of qualified majority voting, which we should not have accepted. It is important not to accept qualified majority voting.

The treaty therefore advances the processes of union without consent, which is the dilemma facing Europe. There is a drive among Europe's elite to build an ever closer union, and a total reluctance among electorates to go down that road. A great gulf is opening in Europe, which is apparent in all the polls. The elites decide something, but the electorates, when they are asked to vote on it, say no, thereby laying the elites a stymie.

Amsterdam is a part of the process of bamboozlement and deceit by European elites, and it is a bit of a shame that it was swung on us. Our new Government, of whom I am very proud—I am speaking in a supportive role today, because I do not want them to get into a constant, nagging battle with Europe, as the previous Government did—went to Amsterdam, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed and bicycling, to offer Europe something quite important: our adhesion to the social chapter, mish-mash as it is. We offered something. In return, we got an attempt to fiddle past us the developments that I mentioned.

It would have been sensible and decent of European leaders to welcome our arrival, adhesion and new mood. They should have said, "We shall stop the process of bamboozlement," and not tried to foist upon us the treaty's very minor developments.

Those are, however, minor worries. Today's attempt at debate by the House shows how unimportant the treaty is and the triviality of most of its proposals. It is supposed to be a foundation for future advance—according to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome—but it is not a foundation on which anything can be built. It is merely a series of complicated little knots to try to tie up ends left loose at Maastricht. It is a complex mess that is being foisted on electorates because they do not understand it or what is going on. The detail is too trivial for people to pay attention to.

There is not enough in the treaty to frighten me—devout Euro-sceptic and, I hope, defender of the national interest that I am. The treaty does not make me particularly anxious or nervous. It is not worth voting against. The question that I have to resolve in the one hour and 40 minutes that remains is whether there is anything in it worth voting for.

8.19 pm

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): We have had an excellent debate. I commend the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on an excellent speech. I endorse much of his analysis.

I have been surprised that we Opposition Members have been lectured by Labour Members and Liberal Democrats about the fact that we do not take Europe in general and the treaty in particular sufficiently seriously when, out of 419 Government Members who could have turned up, there have rarely been as many as a dozen here; when, out of 46 Liberal Democrats, there has usually been only one here; and when, for the bulk of the debate, there have been more Conservatives present than there are members of either of the other two parties. That shows that we take these matters a little more seriously than they do.

About an hour ago, it was interesting that there was no one on the Government Benches who wished to take part in the debate. One could see urgent consultation going on. The Whips were sent forth to scour the Lobby and empty the Library. Who did they find? They found the hon. Member for Great Grimsby. I know that it has been a bad day for Government Front Benchers; finding him was perhaps not exactly according to plan.

As other Opposition Members have already said, there are some elements of the treaty—relatively minor, but none the less important—which I welcome. I of course welcome any toughening of provisions against fraud and a legal guarantee concerning our borders—although I regret that the Government have not paid tribute to the fact that political agreement on that was secured as long ago as March. I also regret that our legal position is only as a result of an opt-out of a much greater strengthening of the Schengen agreement, and indeed its incorporation in the treaty of Rome.

I welcome the provisions relating to animal welfare. As someone who represents a heavily rural and agricultural constituency, I very much share the hope of many of my constituents that that provision will not be enforced in a way that results in British farmers being expected to meet and enforce higher standards than elsewhere.

One of the central arguments in this debate has been the one advanced by the hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and the Foreign Secretary: if one were pro-European, even pro-membership of the European Union, and certainly if one had ever supported any European treaty in the past, one had to support the Amsterdam treaty. It was said that one could not treat the Amsterdam treaty separately from the way in which one had regarded any other treaty. Much was made of the fact that, if the Conservative party voted against the Bill and the treaty, it would demonstrate that it had finally broken any connection whatever with the EU, had become an anti-European party and was on the road towards withdrawal.

I found all that a little difficult to reconcile with the Labour party's attitude toward ratification of the Maastricht treaty when in opposition. Under its previous leader, who was a convinced and committed pro-European, Labour Members fought tooth and nail to resist ratification of the Maastricht treaty.

I pay tribute to the Liberal Democrats because they, unlike the Labour party, supported the Conservative party's paving motion five years ago almost to the day. Even the Liberal Democrats at various stages during the passage of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill on the Maastricht treaty made it clear that they were in opposition and were trying to maximise difficulty for the Government of the day.

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If it is all right for the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats to attack, undermine and seek to impede ratification of an EU treaty and not thereby expect to be accused of being anti-European, the same applies to us. As Labour Members and Liberal Democrats said five

[Mr. Tim Collins]

years ago, it was their duty to oppose. It is now our duty to oppose. We do not need to be lectured on being anti-European by parties that played the same game when the boot was on the other foot.

Mr. Mitchell: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman's interpretation of what happened during debate on the Maastricht treaty was quite correct. It was my experience that the opposition was left to some 30 Conservative Members, who were then on the Government Benches, and about 60 Labour Members on the Opposition Benches. There was collusion between those on the two Front Benches to smuggle a treaty through that neither of them particularly wanted but wanted to pass.

Mr. Collins: The hon. Gentleman was a Member of the previous Parliament and I was not, but he will know that, in the vote on the paving motion—I repeat that that paving motion, which was necessary to ensure that the process of ratification of the Maastricht treaty could continue, took place five years ago almost to the day—the entire Labour party, including its most Europhile members and those who have lectured us today continually about how, if we oppose the Amsterdam treaty, we must be against membership of the EU, voted against the motion. They knew that, if they had prevailed in that vote, ratification of the Maastricht treaty could not have proceeded.

Mr. Mitchell *indicated assent.*

Mr. Collins: The hon. Gentleman is nodding, so perhaps he will accept that point.

I turn to what is not in the Amsterdam treaty. It was notable that the Foreign Secretary made no reference whatever to fish. The subject was mentioned by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and others. What the Foreign Secretary did instead was shake his head vigorously when my right hon. and learned Friend described the exchange of correspondence between the Prime Minister and the President of the Commission as "worthless" and pointed out that that correspondence had no legal status and was therefore not as good as modifying the treaty.

In my capacity as a member of the Select Committee on Agriculture, I asked a question and was told this morning by the most senior official dealing with fisheries in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that that exchange of letters had no legal status whatever. Frankly, the clear statement that we were given in advance of the general election that the Labour party would fight at least as hard as the previous Conservative Government on behalf of British fishermen has been shown to be worthless.

What else is not in the treaty? Notably, there is no exchange for the United Kingdom for us having signed up to the social chapter. The Foreign Secretary was quite explicit about that. He said that it was not a concession for us to sign the social chapter, that it was not something that we were giving to our partners, that it was not giving them an advantage in comparison with the previous position. That is a most extraordinary position to take.

Even if one is persuaded that, on balance, it is better to be party to the social chapter, it was clear that signing it gave our partners some control and influence over working practices in this country which they did not have before and in return for which any half-decent negotiator would have wanted some form of concession. None was found; none was sought.

A few years ago, I had the great honour of being an adviser to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, the shadow Foreign Secretary, when he was Secretary of State for Employment at the time the social chapter was initially considered as possibly being part of the Maastricht treaty. I cannot believe that the advice that we received from officials then has changed since. That advice was that, if qualified majority voting were granted under the social chapter to what I believe are called "working conditions", anything could go through under that; the European Court and the Commission would hold that virtually anything relating to strikes, industrial relations or any other measures in the social chapter could take place under "working conditions".

I see some Government Members shaking their heads. No doubt they are thinking that there is language in the social chapter that specifically exempts strikes and industrial relations, but the legal advice six or seven years ago from officials in the Department of Employment was that, if we signed the social chapter, QMV on working conditions meant QMV on everything.

The only argument in defence of our signature to the social chapter that the Foreign Secretary could advance was that the Confederation of British Industry was in favour of it in some way. He gave the direct implication that the CBI was in favour of signing the social chapter and that it had gained something because it was now, as part of the COREPER—Committee of Permanent Representatives—process, part of the European social process. But the CBI is against a British signature to the social chapter.

We on the Conservative Benches have regularly been lectured in the past two or three weeks about why we should listen to the CBI on Europe. Again, that rule does not seem to apply to Labour when in government. As I pointed out to the Foreign Secretary—a point that he was not able to answer—as recently as the end of last week, the CBI's business briefing said that the Government's guarantees on works councils did not hold water, because the issue would be dealt with by QMV under the social chapter.

Mrs. Browning: Is my hon. Friend aware that the CBI has described the social chapter as an empty revolver, saying that once the Government had signed up to it, anything could be put in? It would be simply an empty chamber from which they could fire as much as they liked.

Mr. Collins: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The Government should not pretend that their signature on the social chapter has the support of British businesses. It does not. To say otherwise would be to mislead the House—no doubt inadvertently.

We should consider some of the provisions in the Bill. We have already heard a detailed examination of the provisions relating to subsidiarity. The Foreign Secretary laid great stress on those provisions, but it could be argued that the new provisions are worse than the old ones in the Maastricht treaty. The new subsidiarity provisions are

explicitly made subject to the acquis communautaire, which means that the hope that we once held that subsidiarity would allow the repeal of existing European regulations cannot be fulfilled. There will be no change to any powers, directives or measures that have already been passed to Brussels or by Brussels.

What else is in the treaty? We have heard about measures on common foreign and security policy. There are some dangers in the move—albeit limited—towards qualified majority voting on foreign and security policy. It may relate only, as the treaty now says, to the implementation of policy areas in which unanimous agreement had previously been established, but let us think what that might mean. Reaching a unanimous agreement among the Foreign Ministers that Saddam Hussein should be dealt with, that there should be peace in eastern Europe or that stability in certain parts of Africa is desirable would be easy, but the devil is in the detail of how such specific and important objectives should be achieved. We should not accept, even in a limited way, that a nation's foreign policy can be dictated by other nations.

At the beginning of his speech, the Foreign Secretary said that one of the great triumphs of the treaty of Amsterdam was that it had secured two of the great aspects of the nation—borders and defence policy, because of the reference to NATO. Surely foreign policy and decisions on taxes, spending and interest rates are equally important, if not more important, in defining the core of a nation. The treaty makes it possible for the first time for aspects of foreign policy to be decided against the will of a European Union Government. The Government also say that there is no constitutional bar to membership of a single currency. That is bizarre.

The Government are pretending to stand up for the British nation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) pointed out, they have a manifesto pledge to work for a Europe of independent nation states, but step by step, quiver by quiver, they are giving more power to Europe in a way that ultimately can only be incompatible with a system of independent nation states.

I find it disturbing that the Government seem to have no sense of an end point to European integration. It has been put to Conservative Members that, because we have signed up to previous extensions of qualified majority voting, to transfers of sovereignty to Brussels and to greater pooling, we must be in favour of it for ever and a day. That is rather like the unedifying spectacle of the delinquent child down the centuries caught committing an offence in the playground and saying to the teacher, "But please, sir, he did it first." Saying that someone else has done it first is not a sufficient justification for any action. An action has to stand on its own merits.

We accept that there may be a case for some matters being determined by qualified majority voting, but it does not necessarily follow that all matters must be determined in that way. There must be a point at which we stop. The Conservatives have been clear about that. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said in his speech to the party conference that he believed that there were limits to European integration and that we were close to those limits. We have stood out in favour of extensions to qualified majority voting in the past, but we are not in favour of any more. That is why we have drawn a line in the sand with the position that we stated in our manifesto—a position that we shall be pursuing consistently later tonight. We are not in favour of any more extensions of qualified majority voting.

The Government clearly favour some more extensions. They favour those in the treaty of Amsterdam. How many other extensions are they in favour of? We know that the treaty will result in yet another intergovernmental conference in a few years. How much further does the ratchet go? How much more salami slicing will there be? Is there a point at which the Government will say that there might be a few things left that should be reserved for the British Parliament and the British nation—perhaps organising tiddlywinks tournaments?

That is the biggest gap in the Bill and the treaty, because the Government have no end point and no sense that the process of European integration cannot continue indefinitely and unstoppably. They said in their manifesto that their aim was to preserve a Europe of nation states.

The treaty and the Bill are typical of a Government whose representatives on the international stage are the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for International Development, who might be described as the fifth Teletubby and the sixth Spice Girl—perhaps Hairy Tubby and Bolshie Spice. The country is not best represented abroad in that way. The treaty is not what the country needs, and the House should not endorse the Bill.

8.36 pm

Mr. Jim Murphy (Eastwood): Contrary to what we have heard from the Conservatives, the treaty is good news for Britain. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on his tough negotiation and excellent bicycle riding, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who has proved himself a strong negotiator for British interests in his short time in office.

Let us contrast what we are debating with what would have been before us if the Conservatives had won the general election. We would have had a view of the United Kingdom belonging to an age gone by. We would have had policies that were out of touch with the people of the United Kingdom and more in touch with the views of the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor). Instead, we are discussing a people's agenda. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members may sneer at the idea of a people's agenda, but I suspect that the people of the United Kingdom sneered at them on 1 May—perhaps that is one of the reasons for their defeat.

The people's agenda includes being in touch and open. It includes working on the environment, jobs, the economy and anti-discrimination measures. Tonight, we are discussing a series of sensible measures that will improve the United Kingdom and our continent.

On the subject of openness, I will not take issue with some of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), who is now leaving the Chamber. I do not wish to delay his departure. I agree with him that some aspects of European institutions are not perfect and need reform. The treaty will go some way towards that. We need greater access to information and more accountability in the European Union and there is scope for a radical reappraisal. Only through reform can we make the European Union even more popular.

Once we have reformed, I believe that the concerns of my hon. Friend will be met, but so will the more cynical concerns expressed by the Opposition today. They are

[Mr. Jim Murphy]

false concerns, and we have had false tears and false pronouncements from the Opposition. They fear the idea of reformed, modern and representative European institutions, and that is why their opposition has been so forceful today.

On anti-discrimination measures, the treaty lays down a clear marker that our continent will not tolerate any form of discrimination. Our Government have nobly intervened to ensure protection for those who suffer disabilities, and we have led the way in that important sphere. Other aspects of discrimination are crucial, including discrimination on grounds of age, gender, sexual orientation and race. I am pleased that we are considering the issues of xenophobia and anti-semitism and measures to outlaw and reduce their occurrence throughout Europe.

The treaty also covers details of foreign policy. I did not understand many of the comments made by Opposition Members tonight about foreign policy and co-operation, because the Amsterdam treaty clearly states that NATO will remain the cornerstone of our defence policy. It mentions the involvement of the Western European Union, but it does not foresee—contrary to what we have heard from the Opposition today—a single armed force under a unified European command.

As a newly elected Member of Parliament, I have joined the armed forces parliamentary scheme. Only last week I travelled to discuss strategic defence issues with representatives of NATO. They accepted the need for reform, which is also reflected in the Amsterdam treaty. Europe must have a greater say and involvement in NATO, and its priorities must more clearly represent the concerns, fears and aspirations of Europe. I believe that that is happening. It was brought home to me as I received my briefing from a member of the Dutch Navy, who talked of the need to reform NATO to make it more Euro-centred.

I have already mentioned the idea of a people's Europe; the social chapter—which covers aspects of social justice—is crucial to that. The Amsterdam treaty mentions job creation, but instead of suggesting a pan-European training scheme it envisages job creation through a dynamic and effective European economy and accepts that job creation is not solely or primarily the responsibility of nation states. It accepts that Europe and the United Kingdom will succeed not by becoming a sweatshop, but by competing at an equal level of high skills. Leon Brittan wrote in today's *The Daily Telegraph*:

"the Social Chapter no longer poses a serious threat"

to the United Kingdom. For once I agree with him. I wonder whether Opposition Members agree.

Mr. Rammell: Opposition Members have suggested that the British Government should have traded our support for the social chapter for some other gain. Given our vigorous opposition of the previous Government's opt-out on the social chapter and given that we have been lectured about negotiating skills, does my hon. Friend agree that such a stance would have been wholly incredible?

Mr. Murphy: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments; those are important points. If we had been left with the previous Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary negotiating on our behalf, the European Union—and the United Kingdom—would have been diminished. We would have been further isolated, with a parochial, backward-looking, short-termist approach and ideology that would have weakened rather than strengthened Europe, because the United Kingdom would not have been centrally involved. It would have weakened this country too, not only in the eyes of other European countries but in those of our own citizens.

There is one other issue involving Europe that is close to my heart, and I do not believe that it has yet been discussed in great detail this evening. I apologise if some hon. Members have alluded to it and I have not heard them—I could not be here for the full debate. The Amsterdam treaty is concerned with sport, of which I am a fervent practitioner and for which I am a keen enthusiast. The talk is of learning from other nations. We may learn from other nations, in terms of football teams, during France 98, but I sincerely hope not.

It is now a quarter to 9, and I believe that there are only 15 or 20 minutes to go in the Scotland *v.* France football game.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): What is the score?

Mr. Murphy: I have no idea what the latest score is, but if someone wishes to offer that information from a sedentary position I shall be glad to receive it.

Some aspects of co-operation in sport are important, such as the idea of training mechanisms, that ensure that young people are imbued from an early age with the concepts of competition, achievement and skills. I believe that Amsterdam could make an important contribution in that respect.

The last major subject on which I shall comment is police and judicial co-operation. I hope that such co-operation will be supported in the House tonight. It is a consensus-building measure. Tough action on terrorism and on trafficking of drugs or arms, and tougher action on offences against children, should be welcomed on both sides of the House.

Finally, I shall comment on some aspects of the Opposition, especially the Conservative party. Again I invite Conservative Members who speak from now on to identify which members of their party they agree with, which members of the shadow Cabinet they are in tune with and whose wing of the party they are on.

The Conservative Member who spoke before me—I apologise for my poor manners in not knowing your constituency—talked about how many Conservative Members were on the Opposition Benches this evening. It would have been more appropriate to talk about how many Conservative parties there are on the Opposition Benches when we talk about Europe.

Although he is not now in attendance, we have already heard the shadow Foreign Secretary who, only 40 hours before the general election, said that Amsterdam would

"put our survival as a nation in question".

Then there is the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) who said, rather profoundly in comparison with his usual comments, that if we signed up to Amsterdam we would "abolish our country".

Conservative Members may wish to tell us later whether they agree with those sentiments or wish to disown them.

Mr. Collins: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, and perhaps in your comments you can identify your constituency and I can—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

Mr. Collins *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. I must remind the hon. Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) that he has been slipping into direct address. He should address all his remarks to the Chair and refer to Opposition Members in the third person.

Mr. Collins: As the hon. Member for Eastwood is on the subject of two parties and talking about who agrees with whom, does he agree with the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), who is so clearly against a single currency? For that matter, earlier in the debate when the hon. Member for Eastwood was not here, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) made it clear that he thought that the Government had made a complete pig's ear of the negotiations on border controls for Gibraltar.

Mr. Murphy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments, and I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for using the incorrect personal pronoun.

In response to the hon. Gentleman, I could refer him to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) who in response to the comments of the right hon. Member for Wokingham, said:

"Trying to claim that Amsterdam is some great threat to the nation state is not very sustainable at all."

Perhaps Conservative Members can tell me whether they agree with or disown the comments of the hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) who, in an honourable act, removed himself from the Front Bench and said:

"I do hope that we do not take a bull-headed view of the Amsterdam treaty."

Mrs. Browning: Had the hon. Gentleman been in the Chamber earlier, he would have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr. Taylor) say that he vote with the Opposition tonight.

Mr. Murphy: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, but thus far we have indeed had a bull-headed approach from Conservative Members. The hon. Member for Esher and Walton may vote with the Opposition tonight, but that will be in direct contradiction to his previous pronouncements.

I believe that Amsterdam will advance our nation's interests because it will strengthen both the United Kingdom and the European Union. The United Kingdom will progress through co-operation with our European partners, in a forceful way, for years to come. Contrast that with the agenda that we could have had if the Conservatives were still in power: we would have had an isolationist, reactionary, jingoistic, little-Englander approach that is absolutely out of touch with the people of the United Kingdom.

8.51 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I am not sure that I recognise the people's Europe or new Europe about which the hon. Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) was talking. I hope that I can convince him that there will be only one Conservative party voting tonight.

I have always regarded myself as absolutely positive on our role in the European Union, and I believe that we should be an active member of it. During the general election campaign, the Referendum party claimed that a vote for me was a vote for Brussels, but I hope that everyone will be disabused of that this evening and will not find it strange that I intend to oppose the Bill and the treaty, for three very good reasons.

First, it is a mean treaty. It does nothing to adjust the institutions to cater for an enlarged European Union. Enlargement is hardly addressed, so we will need another intergovernmental conference and another treaty.

Secondly, the social chapter and employment chapter, of which little mention has been made today, will do nothing to create a single new job in my constituency, and I believe that the resulting loss of competitiveness may well lead to job losses and bankruptcies among small and medium-sized businesses.

Thirdly, the Government's failure to use the unanimity that is required in treaty negotiations to secure any concessions on fishing quotas or the working time directive is a disgrace to whatever negotiating skills they thought they might have.

I call the treaty mean because it is not a striking document and lacks the simple focus of the Single European Act with its creation of the single market. It lacks the purpose of the Maastricht treaty, which dealt with economic and monetary union—whatever one's view of that might be—and set up the pillars of intergovernmental co-operation on foreign affairs, justice and home affairs.

The treaty should have been bold—a blueprint for the enlargement of the Union. It has clearly failed in that. Conservative Members have asked about the changes in qualified majority voting and the powers of the European Parliament. In terms of the great leap forward that the Community is about to take in incorporating the formerly oppressed and destitute nations of eastern Europe, the treaty is merely tinkering. It does not deal with the problem at all.

If we are to incorporate states in central and eastern Europe, we must tackle the complex web of institutional questions, including the voting weights in the Council, the presidency of the Council and the way in which it rotates, and the size of the Commission. As we take in smaller and weaker nations, the whole question of big versus small nations must be tackled. The strains are not only institutional but financial. Neither the Amsterdam treaty nor the Commission's agenda 2000 go any way to tackling the financial problems or genuinely reforming the common agricultural policy. It is in that respect that the treaty is a failure, and the blame for that lies collectively with all the nation states that negotiated at Amsterdam.

[Mr. Robert Walter]

However, the blame for incorporation of the social chapter lies firmly with the Government and their adherence to outdated and uncompetitive dogma. There are those who would protest that, at the time of the signing of the Amsterdam treaty, the social chapter was an empty box. It contained just two provisions—one on works councils and one on parental leave. But for how long?

The United Kingdom has business practices that do not follow the European social model. The United Kingdom is seen on the continent as more competitive and, as a result, a threat. Already, the Commission proposes to make the works council directive, which originally applied to firms with 1,000 employees or more, apply to firms with just 50 employees. That would make a great difference to the implications of the directive.

How many new jobs will be created as a result of the Government's signing the social chapter? Perhaps more pertinent, how many jobs will be destroyed by it and by the associated introduction of a statutory minimum wage?

Mrs. Anne McGuire (Stirling): Will the hon. Gentleman explain how a level playing field is uncompetitive? If he is into statistical analysis, will he advise us how many people's working lives will be improved by the social chapter?

Mr. Walter: I suggest that those who are unemployed on the continent of Europe would welcome the employment opportunities that exist in Britain as a result of the previous Government's policies. We are talking about a Europe that is able to compete in the modern world.

I regard myself as a good European, but I have no problem in opposing the social chapter and the employment chapter that goes with it because they are bad for Britain and bad for Europe. The treaty is a missed opportunity for Europe and for Britain—the opportunity has been missed to right some of the wrongs of the past, such as the abuse of fishing quotas. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) has left the Chamber. We could have righted a wrong that had been imposed on the fishermen of Britain. There is also a wrong in the back-door provisions of the working time directive. The Government failed. It was only to be expected that they would not do anything about the working time directive, but on fishing there was a unique opportunity to do something.

Nothing is achieved in treaty negotiations without unanimity. We could have said, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) was prepared to say if he had been at the negotiating table, that if there was no deal on fishing there would be no treaty. The Government failed to do that and, as others have said, they came back with a worthless piece of paper. The Government continue to fail to stand up for Britain.

For my hon. Friends and me, a vote against the Bill tonight is a vote against a Bill that brings in the provisions of a treaty that fails to meet the real challenge of Europe. I am absolutely convinced that the Bill is not good for Europe, or for Britain. The social chapter does not cause harmony and prosperity on the continent, and nor will it do so in Britain. I shall oppose the Bill.

8.59 pm

Dr. Rudi Vis (Finchley and Golders Green): Amsterdam is my home town, so I must be a raving Europhile in the eyes of most people, but I have to admit that, as a Dutch-born person, I have found this a very amusing debate.

I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), who has now left the Chamber, saying that what is before us is more or less empty. I heard the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), who has also now gone, saying that he will fight every letter, every word and every sentence because it is all wrong. Finally, I heard the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), who is trying a new tack for a Conservative, saying that he was a good European but that he could not possibly sign up to anything that Europe might put to him.

It is a pity that he has gone, because I also listened carefully to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins). With my Dutch background, I know one or two things that might lift the veil a little between those Conservative Members who are so upset about Europe and my own position, which might not be the position of the Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman said two things that I found very interesting and they stand out for me. First, he said the devil is the detail and, secondly, he said that there must be an end point.

If the devil is in the detail, we will never get anywhere and that is a difficulty. That is not Dutch thinking—I am not standing here as a Dutch person—but the Dutch have always said that Europe is a journey. It is not about detail—we sit around a table and negotiate and we have to put ourselves in the driving seat if we want to say anything about the direction in which this country wants Europe to go. As for the contention that there must be an end point, how can one argue in general that it must be good for Britain to go no further with Europe? How can one determine an end point if one cannot determine beforehand whether that end point is or is not good for Britain?

Am I a raving Europhile? Let us check a few points. I believe that something went wrong when this country first considered joining the European Economic Community, which really started not in 1958, but—as most people would accept—in 1951, with the treaty of Paris. It was a shame that Britain did not join at that time. It was the Dutch who argued strongly that Britain should come in, because they foresaw the difficulties arising from an alliance between France and West Germany, as it then was; but the decision was no. The second chance came in 1955 in Messina, but again the answer was no, despite the fact that the Dutch, the Italians and the Belgians wanted this country to join. It was not until 1958 that the treaty was signed to establish the European Economic Community.

Much has been said about the awful aspects of being a member of the European Union and playing a strong role in Europe. I suggest that Conservative Members should go to the Library and ask what was the gross domestic product of the United Kingdom and of France in 1958; they should then compare those figures to the GDP of the UK and France when this country finally joined the EEC—they will see how we have missed the boat. If Conservative Members look at the development of the European Coal and Steel Community, which was

established in 1951, they will see—more than 40 years later—that, if this nation had joined in 1951, it would have suffered far fewer problems.

The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East—I listened to his speech on the monitor—talked about the CAP. I am aware that the CAP is not necessarily a good policy now. It was added in 1961—it was written by Mr. Mansholt, a friend of my family—when aspects of the CAP were necessary. The fact that we cannot get rid of it now that we have gluts is a design fault, not a fault of the intention of the CAP. Like many other people, I was very much in favour of the British agricultural policy, but in 1973 we had no chance to insist that the CAP be changed to the British agricultural policy. Had we had such a chance, I would have applauded Mr. Mansholt and argued the case for adopting the British agricultural policy rather than the CAP, which is basically the French agricultural policy. Those matters are easily forgotten by Conservative Members.

A few days before the signing of the Amsterdam treaty, I was in Amsterdam asking Dutch people, on behalf of a television company, what they thought the treaty would do. As I said before—I was able to make one hon. Member leave the Chamber when I did so—the Dutch see Europe as a journey. It is an agenda of thought and of contribution, in which one plays a role. That is a good agenda.

When I look at the Amsterdam treaty, I see part of that journey. Only a few weeks before Amsterdam, the Prime Minister went to Noordwijk. When one looks at those meetings, one sees the phenomenal influence that this country has had on the nature of the debate in Europe. The Prime Minister said in Noordwijk, "You cannot do this and you cannot do that because unemployment in many nations is much higher than it should be." That issue suddenly became a priority, because we regard good working conditions, health and a variety of issues as important. The social chapter is excellent, and the fact that we have not been party to it is a shame on this country.

The UK in the EU is not good enough, and the UK outside or on the periphery of the EU is unthinkable. The UK should be in the middle of the EU, making and defending propositions and fighting for them.

9.7 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I shall be extremely brief. We have heard a great deal this evening about the increased powers that the European Parliament has received. The treaty undoubtedly gives the European Parliament new powers, but I draw the House's attention to a matter that has not hitherto been drawn to our attention: the shift in the balance of power between the EU institutions.

My perception of the treaty is that the European Court of Justice wins in the shift in the balance of power. We seem to be moving towards an American constitutional model for the European Union—perhaps an extreme form of the US model—where unelected judges can strike down law and make law. The Government may regard that tendency as desirable. It would certainly be in keeping with their decision to incorporate the European convention on human rights into United Kingdom domestic law, but such a constitutional model has not been debated. What strikes me as incredible about the process of constitution-building is that there has been no discussion, no debate and no constitutional convention about the constitutional model that we want for the European Union.

It is extraordinary that there has been such a significant shift in the balance of power of the European institutions without anyone drawing attention to it or discussing it. I fear that there has deliberately been no discussion of the constitution of the European Union. If there was, people would quickly discover what it was about. They do not want a constitution for it at all. They are strongly opposed to it. That alone is sufficient reason for voting against the Bill.

9.9 pm

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): I have no problem opposing the Bill. My first reason concerns the wider constitutional implications, which have been discussed with great eloquence. I was sent by my constituency to oppose Bills such as this. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) about the drip, drip, drip process. We are constantly told that there will be no more transfer of power from this country to Brussels, but what do we find? More transfer of power from Britain to Brussels.

Secondly, I object to some of the items in the treaty. We must question why a level playing field is desirable. How will that benefit Britain? In terms of inward investment, will foreign countries invest in Britain if we are the same as all the other countries in Europe? What is the point of investing on the edge of Europe if we are the same as the rest of Europe? If the costs of employment in the United Kingdom are the same as in the rest of Europe, countries such as Japan will invest in the centre of Europe, which is Germany, not in this country.

What benefits will the social chapter bring British workers? We must look across the continent of Europe to see the benefits that the social chapter and similar legislation have brought people there. Levels of unemployment across Europe are shameful. I do not want Britain to go down that road.

The treaty has many constitutional implications, some of which have been mentioned tonight. I shall deal with one or two. Article 13 is against any discrimination on grounds of religion or belief. What implications does that have for Church schools, for example? Has that been thought through? Article 13 also rules out discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. Although we in the Conservative party are extremely tolerant, what implications does that have for national law in respect of gay marriage, for example? Will such proposals be decided in Brussels rather than in our own Parliament?

I am glad to go into the Lobby tonight with the Conservative party united. For Labour Members to criticise Conservative Members for inconsistency is a bit rich. Labour Members should question how many times they have changed their minds on whether we should be a member of the European Union.

9.12 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I shall confine my remarks to the disastrous employment situation in Europe, which has resulted from the labour and welfare laws associated with the social chapter. If, as the treaty requires, Britain signs up to the social chapter and gives up its opt-out, any laws in relevant areas could be imposed on us.

[Mr. Howard Flight]

Over the past 25 years, America has created 30 million new jobs; Europe has lost 20 million. Few people realise that, as the economic cycles have gone round in Europe, unemployment has risen at every trough but unemployment has not fallen at every peak. In Germany, there are now 83 million citizens of whom only 28 million have employment; in the UK, 27 million out of a population of 58 million have employment.

Europe needs drastic reform of its employment and welfare laws. It is not facing up to what is happening in the rest of the world. Competition from the emerging economies and Asia is increasing. Some 20 million people have been priced out of work in the past 20 years. I find it extraordinary that a Government who have pledged to create jobs—we have heard all that pious stuff about jobs for young people—should glibly and callously lock us into the biggest job-destroying measure that Europe has ever seen.

I believe that the Government will rue this day. Unemployment in this country will rise dramatically in the next two years. You will regret the fact that you—the party that is supposed to represent the ordinary working man—will price those people out of work.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must remember that he is addressing the Chair.

Mr. Flight: My apologies, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The Government will live to regret the fact that they have ratted on the very people who voted for them in the last election.

9.15 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I shall be brief. During my business career, I have travelled widely throughout Europe. I should declare an interest in that I am president of the European Tanning Confederation, I speak a couple of European languages, and I struggle by in English.

I draw the attention of smug, complacent Labour Members to the people of Europe. I have been in the Chamber for most of the evening and I have been astonished by the debate's lack of touch with the real businesses and the real people who are trying to make a living in a sclerotic Europe, struggling under burdens such as the social chapter and over-regulation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) spoke eloquently about the social chapter. I point out that Professor Patrick Minford of Liverpool university has calculated that the social chapter and other burdens could reduce gross domestic product by 20 per cent. They had such a devastating impact on the unemployment figures that the computer could not handle them.

I remind hon. Members that, the last time the people of Britain were consulted, they voted to join a free trade area. They believed that they were joining a club of independent sovereign states that would work together in the interests of free trade. We are here for only a short time: power and sovereignty should rest with the people. Smug Labour Members should reflect upon who has sent them here and to whom they are handing powers.

Qualified majority voting is increasing in 16 areas. The gentleman from Amsterdam, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis), attended today's hearing of European Standing Committee A, at which hon. Members considered landfill. He saw how qualified majority voting will clobber many British businesses whose waste goes to landfill. Incineration—which is proposed by the directive—is not suitable for this country.

Dr. Vis: I must admit that Amsterdam is not my constituency. I represent the constituency of Finchley and Golders Green.

Mr. Paterson: I apologise, but that was the only geographical reference that the hon. Gentleman gave.

In the dying two minutes, I draw Labour Members' attention to the people of Europe. It is horrendous to see powers being taken from them and given to institutions. The people of Europe cannot vote for the removal of those who decide matters that govern their lives. I was in France last year during the by-election at Gardanne, the run-off for which was contested by the Communist party and the National Front.

Mr. MacShane: Who did the hon. Gentleman support?

Mr. Paterson: I am sorry, but I am making a desperately serious point.

The vote is going increasingly to undemocratic parties that support the sovereignty of nations. The Vlaams Blok is a deeply unpleasant group that has taken 25 per cent. of the vote in Antwerp. Herr Haider in Austria is also attracting a substantial vote. I believe—as does everyone on the Opposition Benches—in a club of independent states going further into eastern Europe. We should be bringing in the newly free countries. The Amsterdam treaty does nothing for that; it increases the power of an unelected European elite and does down the people of Europe. The consequences will be serious.

9.19 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): This has been an excellent debate. From right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, we have heard a cross-section of views about the Amsterdam treaty and our relationship with Europe generally. That is how it should be, because there is, across the country, a whole spectrum of views about our relationship with Europe. Those views have been replicated on the Floor of the House today. We are discussing perhaps the most important issue that faces the nation. There have been genuine differences of opinion, and the House is wise to hear them all. Today we have seen the House of Commons at its best.

I even enjoyed some of the speeches by hon. Members on the Government Benches. The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) made some important points about cross-border co-operation on crime and drugs. I would make the point that preventing the movement of criminals and drugs across borders is much harder if border controls are given up.

The hon. Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) did the House a great service in probing the Executive very effectively. He revealed the poor performance of our negotiating team at Amsterdam—a point to which I shall return.

The hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) thought that the treaty should have gone further. He made some interesting points, but did not understand our objection to the social chapter. He said that just two directives have emerged so far under existing social chapter provisions, but he does not understand that future unwelcome directives can come from Brussels through the social chapter, and that under qualified majority voting there is nothing we can do to block them. That is the point about which we are most concerned.

The hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) spoke knowledgeably on his favourite subject. He introduced a new concept, claiming that Labour's negotiating performance at Amsterdam was a modest, major achievement. He has coined a new phrase, proclaiming this a modest triumph.

The hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) thought that the tide of integration had gone past its high water mark. Some of us are less certain than he is about that.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) made a sparkling speech, as usual. He said that the treaty was all dressed up with nothing to say and described it as pathetic. He rightly pointed out that it did not offer any solutions to the real problems facing Europe today. He said that it was a complex mess of a treaty. I could not have put it better myself.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House, including the hon. Members for Harlow (Mr. Rammell), for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale), for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones), for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy), made telling and interesting speeches to contribute to the full and frank exchange of views that the House has enjoyed today.

The hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis)—not Amsterdam, we are told—said that Europe was on a journey, that Europe itself is a journey, but, he says, apparently with no destination, which suggests that we shall be going round in circles.

From my right hon. and hon. Friends we heard some excellent and thought-provoking speeches. My recently liberated right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) was at his philosophical best this afternoon. He spoke of the incremental impact of the treaties and questioned the inevitability of future integration. He was right to remind us that the test should always be: what is in the national interest?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) delivered a typically intelligent speech. He pointed out some of the positive aspects of the Amsterdam treaty. We must respect the fact that he speaks for a significant body of people. However, he also powerfully drew our attention to omissions from the treaty, such as the absence of reform of institutions in preparing for enlargement, and to the social chapter, which he described as so harmful to British interests. The discussion between him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst on the evolving nature of the nation state was extremely stimulating, and will be well worth a read tomorrow in *Hansard*.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) treated the House to her personal experience as a Minister battling within the corridors of power in Europe. She made some wise and telling points about the dangers of a developing pattern leading to a country called Europe, and spoke with clarity about the agenda of some member states leading to a common defence policy. The House and the Government would be wise to heed her words carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body) spoke of the importance of pursuing a positive agenda for enlargement. He told us how important the member states of central and eastern Europe consider the enlargement of the European Union and their future membership of it. He was right to point out that, at the Amsterdam summit, the Government failed miserably to deal with any of the issues standing in the way of the enlargement of the European Union.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) spoke with his usual passion and detailed knowledge about the cost of the European Union and the dangers of European integration, and made points that I hope the new Government will consider very carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins)—without a stitch of a note in his hands—rightly drew attention to Labour's cynicism in the previous Parliament over Maastricht, which now renders it impossible for the party to take the high moral ground on the Amsterdam treaty. He made it clear that the letter from the Commissioner on quota hopping had no legal status whatever. He rightly pointed out that this Labour Government received nothing in return for their concession on the social chapter—demonstrating, once again, the appalling negotiating tactics of the new Front Bench. He expounded on the hollowness of Labour's claim that its wording on subsidiarity is superior to ours—which it patently is not—and emphasised that Labour has no end point on European integration.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) drew attention to the many shortcomings of the treaty. He mentioned the failings of Labour's negotiating team in Amsterdam, and rightly highlighted the negative impact of the social chapter.

We heard four sparkling, if rather brief, speeches from other Conservative Members. My hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) drew attention to the lack of a proper debate on the constitution of the European institutions. My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) spoke of the importance of considering the benefits of the decisions we make in respect of British workers and British interests. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) rightly drew attention to the job-destroying character of the social chapter. My hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr. Paterson) spoke up for British business men, on the basis of a lifetime's experience. It has been a first-class debate, and, as usual, the Conservative party has led the way.

As we listened to the debate, it struck me that there were some dogs that did not bark. Where are all the Labour Euro-sceptics? With the exception of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby, we heard nothing from them, although they were very active in the previous Parliament and many of them are still here. I hope that they have not been gagged. We know that socialist Members of the European Parliament have been gagged,

[Mr. Gary Streeter]

and we now seek an assurance from the Foreign Secretary that his Back Benchers have not been gagged on the vital issue of Europe.

Let me say to the Foreign Secretary that this issue is too important for debate on it to be stifled. It is vital for us to hear from hon. Members in all parts of the House, and to hear all the reflections of attitudes to Europe. Perhaps the new Labour Back Benchers' motto is this: "We are all poodles now." I hope that the Minister can assure me that the disgraceful gagging of socialist Members of the European Parliament has not been replicated here in the Westminster Parliament.

In considering the treaty, the House is entitled to ask itself a question: was this the best deal that Britain could get? The answer is a resounding no. Let us be frank: Labour's negotiating team failed at Amsterdam.

Let me set out some of the reasons why we cannot support the treaty that the team brought back. First, it signed the social chapter. Conservatives have always opposed the social chapter, and we shall continue to do so. To sign the social chapter is to lower our legal defences and to invite into our law, into our marketplace and into our culture rules and regulations that are strangers to us. They impose unnecessary burdens on business, which stifles growth and destroys jobs.

We are concerned not only about what is in the social chapter now, but about the malign rules and regulations that may bear down on us at any time in the future. As many of the social chapter provisions are decided by qualified majority voting, we shall have no veto. There is nothing that the Minister, the House or you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with all your power, can do to prevent those new burdens from becoming law in this country.

Unwelcome directives are already on their way. Only last week, the Commission proposed yet more burdens for small and medium-sized businesses in this country, such as works councils for all businesses employing 50 or more people. There are 3.7 million small businesses in this country, many of which are run by self-employed entrepreneurs who have put their homes on the line to back their businesses, who work all hours and who create jobs through their ideas, energy and risk-taking. They do not have the resources to fund personnel departments or compliance officers. How will they be able to find their way through the jungle of new regulations that Brussels will impose?

The Foreign Secretary said that he would ensure that the Commission's proposal is amended. He cannot do that: that is the whole point. There is no guarantee that this country can resist it.

The Government inherited an economy free from the social chapter. They inherited the healthiest economy in living memory. Unemployment is low and falling. We learned today of yet another fall. That has not happened by accident. Our economic success flows from the Conservative Government's supply-side reforms, and from their ability to resist the European social model. Labour gave away all those benefits in Amsterdam at the stroke of a pen.

There are 18 million unemployed people across Europe. In the past 20 years, America has created 36 million new jobs, 31 million of which are in the private sector. In that time, the whole of the European Union created only 5 million new jobs, of which only 1 million are in the private sector. Again, that is no accident. Flexible labour markets create jobs.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) made a telling intervention when he emphasised the importance of flexible labour markets, especially if we join the single currency. That flexibility is why Britain has created more jobs in the past four years under the Conservative Government than all the other major countries of Europe put together. It is why one third of all inward investment into the European Union flows into the United Kingdom. The European social model to which the new Government aspire can result only in more burdens, less flexibility and fewer jobs.

In this new age, the social chapter may sound fair and fashionable. It sounds attractive on the surface. It sounds very new Labour, but like new Labour, it is a fraud. We could pass legislation to make it harder for a company to reduce its work force, to make a company take longer to make decisions and consult more widely, but if reducing the work force is required for the company to survive and if decisions must be taken quickly to match the competition, such legislation will merely jeopardise the jobs of the entire work force. We must never forget that British companies must compete not just in Europe, but globally.

The Conservative Government's refusal to sign up to the social chapter acted as a brake on its development. Now that that brake has been removed by the Amsterdam treaty, new legislation will pile up fast. It is already under way. It comes from Directorate-General V, which is the breeding ground of much interventionist theology, and it has not finished yet. It is too late to man the barricades. Our legal defences are down, so new rules and regulations can enter at will, and the British worker will pay the price.

As long as it contains the social chapter, the Opposition cannot support the Amsterdam treaty. We oppose the results of the sloppy negotiation at Amsterdam. Before they left, Labour Ministers announced to the world's media that they were prepared to make concessions at Amsterdam on QMV, on major extensions of power for the European Parliament and on the social chapter. We heard precious little about what they wanted for Britain in return, and now we know why. They failed on enlargement, on reform of the voting system to give Britain more votes under QMV, and on protection for our fishermen. At Amsterdam, Labour Ministers dutifully made all their concessions, but failed to achieve a single thing in return.

What sort of negotiation is that—to give everything away with one hand and to take nothing back with the other? Is that what the Prime Minister meant when he announced the arrival of the new age of giving? Of course we recognise that Europe is about compromise and give and take—it always has been—but there is a difference between being positive towards Europe and immediately giving in to every demand. At Amsterdam, it was all give and no take.

Just the other day, the Foreign Secretary issued a press release saying that new Labour would give Europe back to the people, but we are entitled to ask: which

people did he have in mind? He has now admitted that, in respect even of the opt-out on border controls that we had negotiated, he blundered. He thought that he had agreed that Britain could opt into those arrangements by QMV, only to discover that the Spanish and others had put through a last-minute amendment.

How did that happen? Had the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office left the meeting early? The hon. Member for Thurrock, who did the House such a service earlier, clearly revealed that the Spanish amendment was not challenged. Why not? Where were the Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister? Had the Prime Minister already started to walk back across the channel? What were they doing? Why did they give the Spanish a free run? The House requires an answer to those questions.

That was a gross dereliction of duty by our negotiating team. It failed and, as a result, our opt-in is governed by unanimity. The Spanish can therefore block it, and they have said that they will do so unless we make concessions on Gibraltar. Among the things that it forgot, Labour forgot to stay until the end of the meeting. Conservative Members cannot condone such sloppy negotiation.

We cannot support Labour's efforts at Amsterdam, because it wasted the opportunity to make progress on enlargement. In its manifesto, Labour said that enlargement was its highest priority, yet it failed to make any progress. Here was an historic opportunity to bring the central and eastern European states in from the cold and to take steps to underpin democracy and capitalism in those former communist countries for the sake of peace, stability and prosperity, but none of the reforms necessary for enlargement was progressed.

Labour has put off until tomorrow what it should have done at Amsterdam. It was more interested in pursuing an agenda of a deeper Europe rather than a wider Europe. It said that enlargement was its priority, but it did not mean it and it did not achieve it—proof, if proof were needed, that Labour still cannot take tough decisions. Through its inexperience and bad judgment, new Labour has missed that historic opportunity, and that, in time, may prove to be its greatest failure.

We cannot support the Amsterdam treaty because it does nothing to help the 18 million people who are unemployed throughout Europe. Of course, it contains some new Labour doublespeak on employment schemes, but when will the Government learn that Government-run schemes do not create jobs? Entrepreneurs and flexible labour markets create jobs. The Amsterdam treaty does nothing to create jobs. It seeks simply to create in Britain the European social model that has failed elsewhere.

Amsterdam paves the way for a new summit on employment—another expensive and ineffective talking shop. How many jobs for British people will the new summit create? Each country has been asked to bring to the summit details of three schemes that have created jobs in that country. May I commend to the Minister as his three schemes flexible labour markets, supply-side reforms and Conservative policies? I wonder which schemes the Minister will bring back from Italy or Belgium to foist on British workers.

All those questions are left unanswered by Amsterdam.

New Labour's efforts in Amsterdam do not deserve our support. Labour has brought back a treaty that is riddled with negotiating errors. It does not spell out a clear way forward for Europe, it incorporates a social chapter that will destroy British jobs and it gives away our interests for nothing in return. It misses an historic opportunity to move forward on enlargement. It is the product of bad judgment and sloppy negotiation. It is the product also of a Government who act without principles and values, and we will oppose it.

9.39 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Doug Henderson): After the general election result and the thumping that the Conservative party received, I thought that we might hear from the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) something slightly more reflective, signalling a little more thinking and a little more pursuit of objectivity. But no, we heard the same old rhetoric and the same old pursuit of narrow political party advantage.

We have had, however, an interesting and varied debate. We heard, predictably, dire warnings from those who see the treaty of Amsterdam as another step toward the end of our national independence. That view is wrong. As many of those who have contributed to the debate have said, the Amsterdam treaty is sensible and good, for Britain and good for Europe. It does not provide massive strides towards greater integration, but it advances the cause of a European Union that works in the interests of its citizens and fully secures the national interests of the United Kingdom.

All that was made possible by the Government's willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue. Since coming to power, we have been determined to pursue a relationship with our European partners that is constructive yet robust in defence of national interests. The Amsterdam treaty shows that that approach can, and will, bear fruit. The public will judge whether this positive, constructive and inclusive approach to Europe works. They will be able to compare it with the sterile, rigid and isolationist approach of the previous Government. We shall continue to be positive in our relations with the European Union.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Since 1990, only Britain and Italy have held their share of world trade, while every other European member country has seen a slip. Why should we want to tie ourselves into working practices that have resulted in that?

Mr. Henderson: I had the misfortune to study economics for four years. That experience taught me never to believe statistics. We can select any years of comparison and obtain any result we want. The real truth about the British economy is what the CBI, the Trades Union Congress and the small business community know, which is that, until we get employability higher up the agenda, there will be no permanent success for the United Kingdom.

There have been some predictable contributions to the debate this evening, and I have enjoyed several of them. I enjoyed the contribution of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). I am told that he is a philosopher, and on that basis I welcome the right hon.

[Mr. Henderson]

Gentleman's reincarnation. I am not so sure that we would follow all the arguments that he advanced this evening, and certainly not his conclusions. Nevertheless, it was an interesting speech.

The right hon. Gentleman's speech was only to be topped by that of the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor), who took the concept of opposition to Europe to greater heights, describing the CBI on the way as stupid. I do not think any right hon. Member had any doubt about the hon. Gentleman's vision.

The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East was joined later in the debate by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Sir R. Body), who thinks that all 11 applicants to the European Union agree with him that the Amsterdam treaty should not be ratified. I have been Member for a bit more than 10 years and have heard many bold assertions. That assertion, however, was one of the most challenging that I have heard in that time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) is a good friend of mine on many political issues. I did not expect huge support from him in this debate, and I was not disappointed. There were other sound speeches—*[Interruption.]* There is plenty more to come.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) made a sound speech. He is most knowledgeable about European matters and helped the House with his assessments of public opinion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) made his maiden speech yesterday and an excellent speech today. He focused on the importance of international action against crime, which is one important aspect of the treaty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastwood (Mr. Murphy) spoke of the people's agenda, and of the important changes that must be made in economic and social policy and in citizens' rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis) made a distinctive speech and said that Europe was a journey. After the past six months, I cannot but agree with him on that score. Unfortunately, it is the same ticket each time—but it is something that must be done.

There were many other very good speeches by hon. Members from both sides of the House, but time does not permit me to deal with them in more detail.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): The hon. Gentleman has 15 minutes.

Mr. Henderson: Yes, and I should like to reply to some of the major political points made by Opposition Front Benchers.

The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) and the hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins) and for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) claimed that a Conservative Government negotiating the Amsterdam treaty would have resolved the fishing crisis. That was a rich claim coming from a Government who were in power for 18 years trying to deal with the issue. Now, six months after they lost power, they say that they have the solution to the fishing problem.

The protocol published last spring by the Conservative Government had no support among our European partners. The matter was raised at a meeting in Bonn between Mr. Kinkel, Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and me, but Mr. Kinkel was not even aware that a protocol has been issued. It was pointless to ask whether he had been asked for his support.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Henderson: No, I will not give way now.

The truth is that Opposition Front Benchers know that there was only one way to go if, in 18 years, they could not resolve the fishing issue. They should have taken the course adopted by this Government: to examine and identify the details and basis for Commission action. We have adopted that course, and we will make some progress on the issue. As the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said, if people who work in fishing in his constituency—which I know is overwhelmingly a fishing constituency—have formed but one judgment on the Conservative Government of the past 18 years, it is that people in the fishing industry were betrayed. That judgment has been replicated by fishing communities across the United Kingdom.

Mr. Gill: Will the hon. Gentleman tell the House what he will do about the problem? Will he reform the common fisheries policy?

Mr. Henderson: I thought that the hon. Gentleman knew the details of European legislation. If he did, he would know that there will be no opportunity to revise that fishing policy for some years. He is stuck with the policy that was agreed unanimously by those who are now Opposition Front Benchers.

One cannot, however, resolve fishing problems by declaration. One must examine the detail, and make proposals that the fishing industry know will have some effect. The House should not take lessons on fishing policy from the Conservative party.

The important issue of enlargement was raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) and for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) and by the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry). The Government believe that it is a top priority of the future direction of Europe that enlargement of the EU takes place at the earliest possible date. That was the approach that we adopted during the Amsterdam treaty negotiations.

It is true that we would have wanted to have been able to deal with institutional questions in June. One or two other nations at the negotiating table were prepared to do that, but at that time, there was not the necessary support to be able to carry through reforms that would have been acceptable to the House. I assure the House that not dealing with such an issue was not in any way due to the Government's reluctance to face up to it. We shall continue to pursue it—indeed, we are already through

bilateral contact with our European partners. It is one of the issues that will be taken forward from the conclusions which will—we hope—be reached at the Luxembourg summit in December.

It should be borne in mind that it is again rich for Opposition Members to complain that no progress has been made on enlargement issues by the Labour Government—which, incidentally, is not true—when, at the same time, they are saying that they would have vetoed the whole treaty because they could not correct the mess that they had made in the fishing industry over the past 18 years.

Mr. Donald Anderson: I warmly commend the Government's initiative to hold a conference on enlargement in spring next year, keeping all the applicant countries in play. Consistent with the view of a people's Europe, will the Minister consider a parliamentary dimension to that conference?

Mr. Henderson: That is an interesting suggestion. It would have been preferable if my hon. Friend had given me some time to reflect on it. I shall come back to him on that. He must understand, however, that the European conference that we propose should take place in February in Britain is for Heads of State and Foreign Ministers. It would send the wrong signals to our European partners and the nations that wish to accede to the EU if we were to dilute the conference. There is a case for fertilisation of parliamentary ideas, for a coming together. If my hon. Friend has specific proposals on that, I would be happy to examine them.

The real issue concerning the Amsterdam treaty is the complete confusion in the public's mind about the Opposition's position—an Opposition who had 18 years to reflect on European issues. The public do not know where the Opposition stand. One minute they are to have a referendum to decide whether the treaty is acceptable to the British people, and then the Leader of the Opposition goes to the Scottish Conservative party conference and the little line on the referendum in the draft press release is dropped for the speech. The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe has lost his argument on a referendum, and the public are confused.

The public are confused about whether the nation state is in question, as the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe claims. They are confused about what the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) said. He said:

"If we sign the present draft of the Amsterdam Treaty, we will abolish our country".

I do not know how one abolishes a country.

That view is in complete contrast to that taken by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), who says:

"Like most European Treaties, it has some good bits and some less good, but overall it's a balanced document. It simply does not involve some fundamental transfer of power to Brussels".

The Conservative party cannot have it both ways. Either the treaty involves a transfer of power or it does not.

I am not surprised at the confusion in the public's mind, considering, as the House will remember, what they were told in the Conservative manifesto on 1 May:

"You can be sure with the Conservatives".

What one can be sure about with the Conservatives is that one is sure to be confused, sure that they will be looking at their own political navels and sure that they will put party advantage before the nation's interest. That is what the people of this country are sure about regarding the Conservatives.

Two myths have emanated from the Opposition Front Bench today. One, which the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe was trying to establish, was that the country would have got a better deal if the treaty had been negotiated by the Conservatives. The House knows that that is pure post-electoral fantasy. For six months before we entered into negotiations on 4 May, no progress was made in the intergovernmental conference, because our partner countries had no confidence that the then Government knew what they stood for, could deliver it or were in a position to negotiate.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Apart from anything else, I am concerned about his health. I think that he is going to have a seizure in a moment. Will he tell us, without becoming too excited, whether there is any increase in qualified majority voting to which he would object in principle? If so, will he specify it to the House?

Mr. Henderson: If the hon. Gentleman is worried about my health, he is welcome to come with me for 10,000 m around Hyde park tomorrow lunchtime. We can talk about it while we are running.

There are areas in which qualified majority voting is not appropriate. It is not appropriate for foreign policy decisions, by and large. [HON. MEMBERS: "By and large!"] Those on the Conservative Front Bench know what I mean. I shall give them credit for having read the treaty, although perhaps I should not. They know that there is a difference between a strategy and a common action. The main point is a strategy. Even if there is a disagreement on a common action, which is the means of implementing a decision, any nation can raise that at the full Council, effectively providing them with a veto.

Since taking office, the Government have been determined to adopt a constructive but robust approach in Europe, protecting the national interest. The Amsterdam treaty shows that that approach can, and does, deliver results. At Amsterdam, all the United Kingdom's major negotiating priorities were achieved. [HON. MEMBERS: "By and large."] We were able to secure for the first time—not by and large—explicit legal security for our border controls and to protect essential interests on immigration and asylum policies. That was a major achievement.

We have agreed measures to improve police and judicial co-operation in the fight against crime. We have agreed measures that will improve the effectiveness of common foreign and security policy. [HON. MEMBERS: "By and large."] We managed—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am having some difficulty hearing the Minister. Could we please conduct the rest of the debate in good order?

Mr. Henderson: We managed for the first time to secure explicit recognition that NATO is the cornerstone of defence for most member states. The previous

[Mr. Henderson]

Government never achieved that. We supported a new focus on issues that really mattered to the citizens of Europe—an employment charter to put jobs at the top of the European Union's agenda, stronger provisions to protect the environment and measures to combat discrimination on the grounds of gender, race or disability.

We have signed up to the social chapter so that British workers will enjoy the same protection as their European counterparts. We have promoted measures to combat fraud in the Union and to promote transparency. We have achieved a legally binding protocol setting out rules for the application of subsidiarity. We have agreed to—indeed, promoted—the extension of qualified majority voting in limited areas, while maintaining the veto where we said that we would. We have ensured that the European Parliament has an effective role in overseeing the work of the Commission, alongside the Council. We have ensured that the questions of reforming the Commission and re-weighting votes will be settled in advance of the next enlargement of the Union. Taken together, those changes are good for Britain and good for Europe. They mark an appreciable step towards our goal of a European Union that works in the interests of citizens. I commend them to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 392, Noes 162.

Division No. 87] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blizzard, Bob
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Church, Ms Judith
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Dalis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenniter *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*

Liddell, Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
Maclennan, Robert
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Saller, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Singh, Marsha
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert (W Ab'd'ns)
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Jon Owen Jones and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Dr Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John

Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Trimble, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waller, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Cran and
Mr. John Whittingdale.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63(2) (Committal of Bills),

That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—*[Mr. Doug Henderson.]*

Question agreed to.

Committee tomorrow.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Sea Fisheries

That the Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme 1997 (S.I., 1997, No. 1924), dated 4th August 1997, a copy of which was laid before this House on 5th August, be approved.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Transport and Works

That the draft Transport and Works (Descriptions of Works Interfering with Navigation) (Amendment) Order 1997, which was laid before this House on 28th October, be approved.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Question agreed to.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

Ordered,

That Mr. Bob Blizzard, Mrs. Helen Brinton, Mr. Dominic Grieve, Mr. John Horam, Dr. Brian Iddon, Mr. Tim Loughton, Mr. Laurence Robertson, Mr. Malcolm Savidge, Mr. Jonathan R. Shaw, Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West), Mr. Paul Truswell and Joan Walley be members of the Environmental Audit Committee.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Poole Harbour (Bridge)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

10.15 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): It is a great pleasure for me to have my first Adjournment debate on Poole harbour bridge. The subject will not excite the same passion as the Amsterdam treaty, except of course in Poole and Dorset, where the bridge is an important issue and there is great strength of feeling about the project, which forms part of the national roads programme.

It is very important that we get this bridge across Holes bay. The future development of Poole is strongly linked to the project. At the end of the term of office of the previous Government, a competition was held for the design of the bridge, and a design was picked in January. Opinions and morale soared with the prospect that the bridge would be built, but there is now concern about what the future and the national roads review may bring; so today I am presenting the case for the bridge to the Minister. I hope that she will listen to what I have to say, and take a full part in the discussions within the Department to make the case for this important bridge.

Poole is a vibrant town. In 1998, it will celebrate the 750th anniversary of the granting of its first charter to allow it to be independent and trade profitably. It is a successful town built around its natural harbour, which is the largest in Europe. It is strategically located on the south coast. It provides freight and passenger services to France, Spain and the channel islands.

Poole is home to many world-class companies. More than 1 million people visit the borough each year to enjoy the water-based leisure and sports facilities. It has a great deal to offer, but one of its main problems is infrastructure. It has grown tremendously in the past 25 years, and the strains are beginning to show.

There are eight main arguments for the bridge. The first is that the port is a major gateway to Europe. "What role for trunk roads in England Volume 2" acknowledges that the principal purpose of Poole harbour crossing and the A31 Poole link road is to link the port of Poole with the national trunk road network. The purpose of the harbour crossing is to relieve congestion on the approach roads to the port and congestion within the port caused by the frequent opening of the Poole lifting bridge.

Poole harbour commissioners, who run the port, have a turnover of more than £12 million a year. They employ 223 people. If one includes sub-contractors and others, about 500 people make their livelihood from the port. If one takes into account the multiplier effect, the port generates revenue for the town of about £50 million a year. The port is among the 15 busiest in the nation. In the south-west, it is second to Bristol, but it has great potential for improving its trade with Europe.

The port is a significant generator of traffic, with 180,000 heavy goods vehicle movements per annum, and 400,000 car movements. As the port has roll on/roll off ferries, the traffic tends to feed into the road system in short, sharp bursts. One of the most important things for people who arrive at a ferry destination is the ability to get out of the port rapidly. Unfortunately, in Poole that does not always happen. United Kingdom policy is to have our ports open and competitive. The shipping

industry is notoriously price-sensitive, and the continued prosperity of the port depends on its being able to offer a competitive service in terms of quality and price. Poole enjoys many advantages, but it needs the bridge.

Secondly, we need integrated transport and effective links to the ferry port. Public policy is moving towards the concept of integrated transport, and to achieve that it is essential that there is transfer between different forms of transport. The port is rail-connected, and the harbour commissioners would like to increase rail traffic, but we also need good road communications for the port to develop. It is essential that we get improved connections via the bridge across Holes bay, so that traffic can move speedily out and into the port.

Thirdly, a successful port is an environmentally friendly Poole harbour. Poole harbour commissioners run conservation policies to keep the harbour a delightful place that are financed via surplus income generated by the port, and the harbour area has many sites of special scientific interest. The benefits in terms of tourism are great, because the port authorities take good care of the harbour.

The fourth reason is sustainable economic development—that is, development on brown-field and not green-field sites. The previous Government did much towards sustainable development, and I understand that the current Government are continuing that commitment to get more housing and industry built on existing or former sites.

Our ability to continue to build on green fields is diminishing and, where possible, we should regenerate urban areas where there is surplus land. Sustainable development strategy involves balancing the need for development with environmental constraints on the use of land, which means encouraging regeneration of urban land and buildings. Such an approach is reflected in the housing Green Paper, "Where shall we live?", which suggests that up to 60 per cent. of the required dwellings might be sited on brown-field sites.

The fifth reason is the regeneration of Lower Hamworthy, which is the dock area of Poole. Over the years, many of the larger companies that surrounded the port have closed, and there are potentially 50 acres that could be developed in and around the port, but development would require people being able to get in and out relatively rapidly. We are therefore talking not only about a bridge, but about the possibility of a regeneration project involving Lower Hamworthy that could reflect on the entire borough of Poole.

Most regeneration schemes, especially those in docklands or Cardiff docks, involve water—people want to live next to water, and even where water is not present, developers put it in. Poole has a most beautiful environment and a vast amount of water and, if we could get the infrastructure right, the land would be of great value. A new bridge might encourage investment in a range of areas, including housing, leisure and port expansion.

The officers of Poole borough council have put considerable work into determining whether development could be undertaken in Lower Hamworthy. They have already spoken to many landowners, and there might be the prospect—I would not state it more strongly than that—that one could get some private sector contributions from the landowners towards the cost of a bridge. Bridges are expensive items, and I do not suppose that such contributions would constitute a large proportion of the cost, but I am sure that, if we got close to having a bridge and had the certainty of investment in Lower Hamworthy, contributions would come in.

The sixth reason is an enhanced role for the town centre. Currently, all the traffic coming from the port goes through the town centre, and that causes jams and reduces the quality of life there. If the traffic were to go straight over Holes bay towards the A350, policies for the town centre could be more sensitively implemented—we could do more for cyclists and pedestrians, for example. In addition, there would be some potential for development in the town centre, the quay and Poole old town. The key point is that building the bridge would have knock-on effects in Lower Hamworthy, the quay and the centre of Poole.

Seventhly, the bridge presents a solution to the traffic problems caused by the existing lifting bridge. The bridge dates back to 1927, and, like any mechanical bridge, it needs more maintenance as time goes on: hence it has to be closed more and more frequently.

The A350 primary route to the port of Poole crosses the Poole lifting bridge. It carries more than 18,000 vehicles a day, including 2,000 goods vehicles. There are seven scheduled lifts and, typically, 10 unscheduled lifts a day to allow maritime traffic to pass, largely from Cobbs quay. That causes chaotic conditions on the surrounding road network. Traffic queues in the town centre cascade back, all the roads become jammed up, and people cannot go about their ordinary business. It even affects public transport. Twenty buses an hour go over the bridge, and if it is closed, public transport and the buses are knocked for six.

In the port, traffic may be trapped for half an hour or longer if a bridge lift coincides with a ferry arrival. Delays to port traffic can be even more extreme.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I very much support what my hon. Friend says, on two counts. First, I represent the borough of Bournemouth, and the economies and prosperity of Bournemouth and Poole are intimately related, so the project would greatly benefit the borough of Bournemouth, which thoroughly supports what my hon. Friend says. Secondly, I declare an interest, as I live on the quay at Poole and can confirm what my hon. Friend says about the congestion and the damage that the lifting bridge does to the environment of those who live there.

Mr. Syms: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. I note that my hon. Friends with Dorset constituencies are sitting all around me. South-east Dorset as an economic unit needs decent infrastructure, and my hon. Friends' support today is much appreciated. I note that I also have the support of one or two hon. Friends who do not come from Dorset, but the New Forest is not terribly far away.

The public and traffic can be held up for hours. Recently, the bridge was closed for three days for essential maintenance. One lady wrote agonisingly to the local newspaper saying that it had taken her an hour and three quarters to go three quarters of a mile. That cannot continue.

[Mr. Syms]

A Poole harbour crossing would provide a direct, uninterrupted link between the port and the A350 dual carriageway, and would therefore resolve the specific problems that I have highlighted.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): If my hon. Friend will allow me, I wish to speak specifically about the A350, which, when it leaves Poole and heads north, linking up with Bristol, the midlands and south Wales, becomes no more than a country lane. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential that the A350 and the improvement schemes for bypasses are in the Dorset county structure plan as soon as possible?

Mr. Syms: I agree with my hon. Friend. The problem with Dorset is where to start improving the infrastructure. I am starting at Poole bridge because it is of most concern to my constituents. All my hon. Friends will have issues that they need to raise. East Dorset district council contacted my hon. Friend today on that issue, because it has great concerns about the A350.

My eighth point concerns the unique role of Poole harbour and regional trunk road priorities. The key point about the bridge is that it would not only accommodate more traffic but would facilitate urban redevelopment in the Hamworthy island. It would allow the port to expand, yet it would improve the quality of life for people who live in the centre of Poole. It therefore meets the criteria for sustainable development.

It would lead Poole to develop in a much better and more strategic way, hitting two objectives. First, it would allow the port to expand, and would allow the sensible development of mixed use, as well as greater jobs and prosperity. Secondly, it would allow people within the town to have a better quality of life by reducing traffic. In terms of pollution and the volume of traffic that people must put up with, we could facilitate that balancing act, which it is always difficult to achieve with a major scheme.

The bridge is not only a priority but a vision for the people of Poole. If, after the review, they can have a guarantee of when it will be built—even if it is a little way off—they can strategically plan. Poole borough council, the harbour authorities and all the local authorities can sit down and have a thorough look at Hamworthy, the quay and the old town area to see how they can improve and strategically plan the borough. That would be far better than the alternative. If the bridge is not built, there will be gridlock, and people will be opposed to development. We will set residents against those who want to prosper in our port.

I am particularly pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions is replying to the debate, because not long ago she was down at the headquarters of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. People there were pleased that, in spite of the change of responsibilities from Opposition spokesman to Government, you still insisted on going ahead with your visit. I feel confident that they mentioned the bridge and traffic in Poole.

When one of the Doorkeepers heard that I had the debate, he said, "I think Glenda is going for the Steve Norris trophy for replying to the most debates." I am not sure whether you have the trophy already, but you are notching up a fair old total. I look forward to your reply, as the matter is of great concern to the people of my constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Member must remember that he is addressing the Chair.

10.30 pm

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid–Dorset and North Poole): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) and to the Minister for allowing me to make a short contribution to the debate.

I endorse my hon. Friend's comments in support of the proposed Poole harbour bridge. My constituency in North Poole offers visitors access to Poole harbour. We would undoubtedly benefit from the improved quality of life in the town if the bridge were built. The proposed replacement crossing would directly relieve the traffic flow, both private and commercial, through the south-western corner of my constituency to the port and the ferries.

I am concerned that, unless road links are developed in conjunction with the crossing, it could well become a bridge to nowhere. In Mid-Dorset we already suffer terrible traffic jams on the roads to the town of Poole. If Poole continues to prosper and grow as a result of the improved access that the new bridge would provide, we could end up with gridlock, as my hon. Friend has already pointed out.

Poole is a major gateway between the continent and the north and west of England, Wales and Ireland. The current port facilities could handle twice the present trade. However, to cope with existing traffic and realise the full potential of the port, existing road links must be dramatically improved. That means that not only the earliest provision of the harbour crossing, but the extension of the A31 link and the upgrading of the A350 north, are essential.

The initial scheme for Poole harbour included the extension of the A31—the existing Dorset way, as it is known—across open country at Canford heath to Wimborne bypass. It would effectively become the Poole bridge link. The scheme must not proceed without it.

Providing Dorset with an enhanced roads network is vital to the economic future of Poole and Dorset. It is also crucial to a better quality of life for my constituents and those who live around the Poole area. It is essential that the Government give the matter sympathetic consideration.

10.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) on obtaining the Adjournment debate, and commend him for his generosity in permitting interventions from the hon. Members for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) and for Mid–Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser). As the hon.

Gentleman pointed out, he has the support of other hon. Members from his region, although they have maintained sedentary positions throughout.

I well remember my visit to the constituency of the hon. Member for Poole. It was a great pleasure for me. The site of the proposed bridge was pointed out to me, and many of the difficulties that he described in the House this evening were raised with me on that day.

I appreciate that the matter is particularly important, not only for the hon. Gentleman's local community and constituents, but for all the hon. Members who have spoken tonight, and for those who have not but who are sitting on the Opposition Benches. I well understand their desire for an early decision about the scheme.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have embarked not only on a roads review, but on a fundamental review of transport policy. The Government's main objectives are a strong economy, a sustainable environment and an inclusive society. In his own way, the hon. Gentleman highlighted those issues in his own constituency. He made some telling points about the importance of transport in achieving the Government's aims and the desires of people in his part of the world.

However, the backdrop to our review is a candid recognition that we must have a shift in direction. Revised national road traffic forecasts published last month show that traffic will increase by nearly 40 per cent. over the next 20 years. If current policies are not adjusted, congestion will worsen, the impact on the environment will be more severe, and those who do not have access to private transport will find it even more difficult to get around.

We must develop an integrated transport system that makes the best use of the contribution that each mode can make; which ensures that all options are considered on a basis that is fair, and is seen to be fair; and takes into account from the outset considerations of accessibility, integration, safety, the environment and the economy. Above all, an integrated transport system must be sustainable. One encouraging aspect of what is undoubtedly an ambitious task is the degree of consensus about the need for change.

We cannot achieve that change in isolation. It is a feature of the policy development work that is now under way that we are involving a wide range of external advice and expertise, including local authorities, businesses, transport professionals and users, and trade unions. That is the context for the roads review: examining the role that trunk roads should play in an integrated and sustainable transport policy. Against the background of increased congestion, we have three broad options for roads: first, to make better use of existing infrastructure; secondly, to manage demand; and, thirdly, to provide new infrastructure.

Making best use of existing infrastructure is the obvious first choice. It has been provided at substantial cost, in both financial and environmental terms, and we must make the best use of that investment. Technologies old and new can help us to make better use of our roads network. Several measures can also bring safety benefits, and we will need to ensure that they are given proper priority. However, we must be realistic about the various options that we can deliver.

At a local level, many authorities are seeking to combine those measures by means of transport packages, so that mobility is maintained but any damaging consequences of such mobility are reduced. The Highways Agency's programme of small safety schemes is continuing, but major new construction is under review. Providing new infrastructure is a very difficult option, financially and in terms of the impact that it may have on the environment. Our starting point is that we shall not proceed with major new trunk road construction unless we are satisfied that there is no better alternative. Even then, there will be difficult choices to be made within the limited resources available.

There is no substitute for rigorous case-by-case examination of the options. Volume two of our consultation document, "What role for Trunk Roads?"—to which the hon. Member for Poole referred—sets out, region by region, the perceived traffic problems and details of the roads programme that we inherited from our predecessors.

The existence of a scheme in the inherited programme is seen as prima facie evidence that there is a transport problem. We are seeking from our regional consultations a view on whether these are the most important problems or whether others deserve greater priority. We envisage two outputs from that part of the review: first, a firm, short-term investment programme; and, secondly, a programme of studies to consider the remaining problems from which the medium and long-term investment programme will emerge.

It may help to look at how the consultations have been taken forward in the region in which the Poole harbour crossing scheme is located. The Government office for the south-west held two day-long seminars over the autumn under the umbrella of the integrated transport consultations.

The first, in Bristol on 16 September, addressed the main themes in the consultative document, "Developing an Integrated Transport Policy". The second seminar, in Taunton on 30 October, concentrated on the roads review and sought to establish the views of those in the south west about investment priorities. The views expressed at the seminars will be taken into account, together with the written and other representations that we have received—including those from the hon. Gentleman and the very strong local support for the Poole harbour crossing scheme.

I recognise the importance of the proposed new Poole harbour crossing at Holes bay in terms of the relief that it would provide for the problems associated with the existing lifting bridge. However, we cannot allow a decision on the scheme to be determined by that factor alone. I note that the hon. Gentleman considers that there is a more pressing case for the second harbour crossing ahead of the associated proposal to connect Poole harbour with the existing A31 trunk road via a new trunk road link. Both the new bridge and the link to the A31 must be judged on their relative merits, and in the context of the roads review. Should the new crossing not go ahead, we would need to consider alternatives with the Highways Agency and local authorities.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

Developing a forward-looking integrated transport policy that supports a strong economy, contributes to a sustainable environment and helps to create a just and inclusive society is an enormous challenge. Through the work now under way on trunk roads, we wish to achieve a robust short-term programme and a system for planning future investment in the road network—whether measures to make better use of the existing network, means of control, or to provide new infrastructure—which is fair and is seen to be fair; which allows a proper opportunity for all concerned to make their contribution; and which looks at transport problems squarely in the context of an integrated strategy.

The hon. Gentleman has made a very telling contribution tonight. I can assure him that the proposals that he presented and the concerns that he highlighted will be examined very closely by the Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty minutes to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 13 November 1997

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

STANDING ORDERS (PRIVATE BUSINESS)

Ordered,

That the Amendments to the Standing Orders relating to Private Business set out in the Schedule be made.

Standing Order 27

Line 73, at end, insert ', Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 27A

Line 24, leave out 'three' and insert 'four'.

Line 25, after 'Environment', insert ', Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 29

Line 8, leave out 'Transport' and insert 'the Environment, Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 30

Line 6, leave out 'Energy' and insert 'Trade and Industry'.

Standing Order 30A

Line 5, after 'Environment', insert ', Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 31

Line 6, leave out 'Transport' and insert 'the Environment, Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 32

Line 13, leave out 'National Rivers Authority' and insert 'Environment Agency'.

Standing Order 33

Line 10, leave out 'National Rivers Authority' and insert 'Environment Agency'.

Standing Order 34

Line 10, leave out 'Transport' and insert 'the Environment, Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 37

Line 10, at end, insert ', Transport and the Regions'.

Line 17, at end, insert ', Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 39

Line 3, after 'bill', insert 'four at the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions'.

Line 3, leave out 'at the Department of the Environment and'.

Line 10, leave out 'of National Heritage' and insert 'for Culture, Media and Sport'.

Line 10, leave out 'the Department of Transport'.

Line 36, leave out 'Great George Street' and insert 'Whitehall'.

Standing Order 42

Line 7, leave out 'National Rivers Authority' and insert 'Environment Agency'.

Standing Order 43

Line 8, leave out 'National Rivers Authority' and insert 'Environment Agency'.

Standing Order 45

Line 20, leave out 'Transport' and insert 'the Environment, Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 47

Line 11, after 'Environment', insert ', Transport and the Regions'.

Standing Order 154

Line 12, leave out 'Transport' and insert 'the Environment, Transport and the Regions'.

Line 27, leave out 'Transport' and insert 'the Environment, Transport and the Regions'.—[*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Voluntary Work

1. **Ms Julie Morgan:** What plans he has to encourage and support voluntary work in the community. [14320]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Alan Howarth): We believe strongly in the value of voluntary work. For this reason, we have recently launched a consultation document on millennium volunteers, and we have been working closely with a wide range of voluntary groups to encourage their participation in the new deal for young unemployed people.

Ms Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply, which I am sure will be welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House. How does he propose to link the opportunities to be made available under the new deal and the millennium project with the social exclusion unit and the many young people who have become alienated and disaffected over the past 18 years?

Mr. Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the way in which she put her question. There is an enormous problem with the exclusion of young people who have become disaffected and alienated from much of the mainstream of our society. We believe strongly in voluntary work as the most valuable means of strengthening the bonds of our society and creating a society in which all can contribute and all are valued. The voluntary sector option of the new deal and millennium volunteers are distinct programmes, as my hon. Friend knows. Both of them will be of considerable interest to others in the Government who, through the work of the social exclusion unit, will be monitoring and promoting the ways in which we address the problem.

Higher Education Funding

2. **Barbara Follett:** If he will make a statement on his proposals to increase funding for higher education. [14321]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): In my statement in September, I outlined how we had identified £165 million for investment in opening up access to higher education, doubling the access funding and providing money to sustain the universities and to ensure that young people have the opportunity of taking up higher education in years to come. Yesterday, I was able to make a similar statement relating to further education.

Barbara Follett: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his reply and for the funds that he announced for the further education sector yesterday. Does he agree that those funds will send an important signal to the students and staff of further education colleges across the country that their work is valuable—as valuable as that of the universities?

Mr. Blunkett: I agree with my hon. Friend. The £83 million that we have identified for direct investment, and the minimum contribution of at least £100 million from the new deal for the under-25s—which will go into further education through the full-time and part-time options for education and training—will make an enormous difference in opening up potential for more than 70,000 additional students next year. The funds will help to protect the colleges, as we did the universities, from the draconian cuts imposed by the previous Government, who paid lip service to expansion while undermining the quality and standard of education.

Mrs. May: The Secretary of State will be aware of the various comments made by spokesmen for Scottish universities on the likely impact of the decision by the Government that English, Northern Ireland and Welsh students will have to pay the full £4,000 tuition fees, while students from other European member states and Scotland will not. Is he aware that in last week's debate on higher education funding, the Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office dismissed the statements that had been made by the Scottish universities on the issue? Who is presenting the correct picture—the Minister or the universities?

Mr. Blunkett: We are of course talking about the £1,000 towards the tuition fee for the final and fourth year for those in the higher income bracket. There is no evidence yet on what the impact might be on English students, because applications have not yet closed in Scotland. One thing is certain: the more fear that is put in students' minds about what they can expect to find and when, the more likely it is that they will not apply. I am confident, as are my right hon. and hon. Friends in Scotland, that the quality of education at universities in Scotland is such that those who are privileged enough to have earnings that will oblige them to pay the full £1,000 fee will feel that it is worth the investment.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: I know that further education colleges in my constituency will warmly welcome the announcement made by my right hon. Friend yesterday. Does he agree that it is an important part of the package to convince young people that further and higher education are worthwhile investments and that those who take a degree are far more likely to have higher earnings, certainly by their mid-30s and for the rest of their lives, than non-graduates of the same ability?

Mr. Blunkett: I agree entirely. It is statistically proven that what my hon. Friend says is correct. We announced yesterday an expansion for further education, and the fact that adult students in further education already contribute towards their fees and feel that it is worth while to do so will be an encouragement to those who go on to higher education: they will see that the higher return on the investment made will be a tremendous financial as well as an educational and employment gain.

Mr. Beggs: The Secretary of State's announcement of additional funding for further and higher education is

welcomed in all regions of the United Kingdom, but we in Northern Ireland are concerned at speculation about the creation of an additional higher education centre in west Belfast, in which £65 million of public money could be invested. Will he consult the Minister responsible for education in Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), and advise him that it is our view that investment in that project is not justified and that moneys available would be better spent on the many existing further and higher education campuses in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Blunkett: I shall be happy to consult my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and her colleagues about how to provide greater access to education for all members of the community in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Jim Marshall: I recognise the problem that my right hon. Friend faces in financing higher and further education, but does he not agree that if the Government's proposals on student funding lead to a dramatic fall in student numbers, that will create an even greater crisis in the sector's finances next year? How does he intend to cope with that potential crisis?

Mr. Blunkett: If there is a drop in the number of students, it will be a tragedy for those who have been discouraged from taking up their places by misleading and scurrilous propaganda: propaganda that suggests that the means-tested family contribution is to rise, when it is not; scurrilous misinformation that suggests to poorer students that they will have to find the £1,000 fee, when they will not; and scurrilous misinformation that deceives them into thinking that the grant is to disappear in one year, when in fact it is being phased out.

There will not be a financial crisis if there is a drop in the number of students, because we are funding those students through the fee process, funding the residual grant and funding the loan. The tragedy would be if those young and mature students were denied the opportunity of better employment prospects and higher earnings from their investment in their own education.

Mr. Dafis: Will the Secretary of State explain in as much detail as possible the connection between the decision to require students to contribute towards their fee, and the additional resources for higher education? Does he intend to ensure that the additional resources from the fee are ring-fenced for higher education, and how permanent will that connection be?

Mr. Blunkett: By 2005-06, on current accounting procedures, an additional £800 million would be available for the further and higher education sector from the introduction of our proposals. That sum would rise substantially under alternative resource accounting processes. That money will be available for lifelong learning. I have made it clear here and in the Select Committee that that is why we are introducing the scheme. We believe that it is an important investment which will open access to the tens of thousands of students who would otherwise be denied it.

Ms Hodge: May I, too, congratulate the Secretary of State on his ingenuity and skill in finding an additional £83 million to invest in further education? Does he agree that the needs of the 2.6 million students in further education are as important as the needs of the 1.8 million students in higher education? Does he further agree that the false divide in the tertiary sector between further and higher does nothing to help the opportunities for all our young people to fulfil their potential?

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I entirely agree. Conservative Members might stop laughing if they realised that in our sixth months in office, my Department has identified within our existing resources, which we inherited, more than £250 million for further and higher education. That is £250 million that the Conservatives failed to identify and did not know was available. Their handling of their responsibilities was grossly incompetent.

Mr. Dorrell: Can the Secretary of State confirm that the effect of his proposals is to raise the cost of a three-year degree course outside London for a typical middle-class student by £3,000, and that the cost of the same degree to a student from a low-income background will rise as a result of his proposals by £5,265? Why are the Government abolishing the means-tested maintenance grant when Dearing recommended that it should be sustained and when the effect of their policy is to deliver such discrimination against low-income students?

Mr. Blunkett: We did not accept the Dearing proposition that the imposition of a contribution to fees should not be means tested; in other words, that all students should be expected to find the contribution towards fees. A party that cut the maintenance grant year after year, introduced the current unfair mortgage-type loan scheme, resisted our requests for an income-related scheme, stood on an election platform that did not say whether it favoured maintaining the grant or introducing fees, and has done a double somersault on its previous policies has no right to question us on this issue.

Training and Enterprise Councils

3. **Mr. Dawson:** What steps the Government are taking to prevent fraud against training and enterprise councils. [14322]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Dr. Kim Howells): The principal responsibility lies with the training and enterprise councils themselves. The Department operates a number of controls to check against uncertain, incorrect or improper payments. My hon. Friend may be assured that we operate those controls with energy and determination.

Mr. Dawson: Does my hon. Friend agree that national vocational qualifications form the cornerstone of essential policies such as welfare to work, the new deal and lifelong learning and that those are the policies that will appeal to and give hope and opportunities to so many people denied chances under the previous Government? Will he assure me that he will look into recent fraud cases relating to training providers offering NVQs, and ensure that people

who have had qualifications withdrawn are given the opportunity to retake tests and gain the appropriate qualifications?

Dr. Howells: I assure my hon. Friend that we will do just that. National vocational qualifications are a tremendous boon to our education system. I believe in them; they have opened up possibilities for learning and entering higher education for a great many people. I have seen it wherever I have gone. Yesterday in a steel plant, I saw a rediscovered joy in learning. The men and women working there were involved in national vocational qualifications and were extremely keen to go on learning. We must ensure that there is no fraud in the system and that no nods and winks are operated by any agency that receives money from the Government. The question of national vocational qualifications must remain compietely unbesmirched by backhanders or sleaze.

Higher Education (Enrolment)

4. **Mr. Spring:** By how much he estimates that enrolment in 1998 in higher education will change, relative to the average levels of the previous three years. [14323]

Dr. Howells: It is too early to estimate higher education enrolment levels in 1998. Applicant numbers are currently slightly down compared with last year.

Mr. Spring: Does the Minister not recognise that the Government's plans will have an impact on young people, particularly from low-income families? Given the Prime Minister's famous words, "Education, education, education," will the Minister take this opportunity now to apologise for the Government's attack on equal access to higher education?

Dr. Howells: I do not know the hon. Gentleman's educational background, but let me tell him this: when I discovered the percentages of young people from different socio-economic groups who go to university and receive higher education—

Mr. Ian Bruce: How does scrapping grants for the poorest students help them?

Dr. Howells: If the hon. Gentleman will wrap up for a moment, I shall answer the main question. Four out of five young people from families of senior managers and professionals go on to university, whereas fewer than one in 10 from unskilled families go to university. We are going to do something about that.

Ms Beverley Hughes: Does my hon. Friend agree that our starting point on this issue is that we recognise that the current system of student support patently does not work? It is also unfair, as it requires part-time and mature students to pay fees. Does he also agree that the Government's proposals—provided that students from low-income families are protected, as they will be—are the best means of ensuring fairer access to, and better funding for, higher education?

Dr. Howells: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. We shall ensure that every student, regardless of background, has access to sufficient money now to get him or her through university degrees. We shall ensure that, when it comes to paying that money back, students will be able to afford to do so. That does not happen now. We shall institute a much better system that will allow it to happen.

Unemployment (Rural Areas)

5. **Mr. David Heath:** What proportion of the young unemployed in rural areas cite lack of available transport as a barrier to employment opportunities. [14324]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Disability Rights (Mr. Andrew Smith): As I expect the hon. Gentleman is aware, a recent survey by the Somerset employment service showed that some 40 per cent. of unemployed young people reported transport to be just such a problem.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. When he evaluates the new deal pilot areas, will he pay particular attention to the pilot scheme in Cornwall? Will he look at the barriers to young people in rural areas, and the barriers that prevent small businesses in rural areas from providing opportunities? Will he ensure that the new deal is a genuine new deal for young people in Somerset villages just as much as it is for young people in cities?

Mr. Smith: Yes, indeed. I shall visit Cornwall on 19 December precisely to examine how the pathfinder proposals are working out there. A number of transport companies already offer discounts for young unemployed people, and those will be part of the new deal. Sheffield supertram operates a reduced fare, and National Express has announced a 50 per cent. discount for those on the new deal and free travel for unemployed people going to interviews. We want to turn that into a national programme and support initiatives with the Rural Development Commission for other ways to include transport in rural areas, such as the project in which the hon. Gentleman was involved in his constituency.

Dr. George Turner: Does my right hon. Friend accept that transport is an especially difficult problem when there are no buses on which to get subsidised fares; and that there is a real need to ensure that opportunities under the new deal are genuinely available in rural constituencies, such as the one I represent, and not simply theoretical possibilities?

Mr. Smith: Yes and I look forward to visiting my hon. Friend's constituency to see the work that he and the local community are doing to address those transport problems. I emphasise that new initiatives are being developed through new deal partnerships with the Rural Development Commission, TECs and local councils. Those initiatives include, for example, pooled taxi use, car sharing and even the leasing of mopeds, and the Government welcome those local initiatives to address local transport needs.

New Deal

6. **Mr. Drew:** What measures he has taken to ensure that options offered to young people on the new deal are of high quality. [14325]

Mr. Blunkett: We count quality as being of paramount importance. That is why in both the gateway and the main

programme there will be key elements, such as contacts with a personal adviser for each participant; contract team visits, which will be made from the Employment Service regions; quality inspection visits for both training and further education; and, of course, the supplementary hotline provided for those who have concerns or worries. It is vital that we work with both employers and the voluntary sector to make sure that this is not a make-work scheme, but a programme to be proud of.

Mr. Drew: I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer. May I ask that the role of the dedicated advisers be brought to the fore, especially in rural areas where people face difficulties of access and a lack of provision and where those advisers will play an interesting and important role?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is quite right. In addition to the measures spelt out a moment ago by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Disability Rights, there will be a discretionary fund, specifically for transport, to assist those who are taking up the full-time education option in further education colleges. We want the advisers to be able to help from the moment young people enter the gateway, with education and social advice to build up their confidence and skills before they enter the main programme and so ensure that they are able to sustain the training and education elements throughout the programme.

Mr. Baldry: I am sure that the Secretary of State would agree that young people, either those in the new deal or those coming into employment generally, will be concerned about the level of the minimum wage. Both the TUC and the trade unions have made representations in respect of the minimum wage. Given the new dispensation, may we have an undertaking from the Government that if, eventually, the minimum wage is set at a level equal to or above what is proposed in those representations, the donations to the Labour party made by the trade unions before the general election will be returned to them?

Mr. Blunkett: If the Conservative party had handed back the money every time they gave a contract to or privatised a company that was associated with, or had been in any way involved with, a donation to the party through either an individual or an organisation, they would have handed back more than they have received over the past 20 years.

Miss Melanie Johnson: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, just as education would help the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), the new deal will provide excellent opportunities to improve the employability of young people, which is an important product of the scheme? Does he also agree that it will be a high-quality scheme and not one designed purely to massage the employment figures, like those of the previous Government?

Mr. Blunkett: My hon. Friend is right. That is why every single option under the new deal will include education and training to a recognised qualification, including a year in a full-time education place. That is why the CBI, the chambers of commerce and the representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises are so supportive of the new deal programme. They recognise, as did the CBI earlier this week, that skills for the future are crucial to the competitiveness of our nation as well as to the life chances of the individual and will be a key element in ensuring that we can encourage growth without inflation and enable our economy to succeed in the 21st century.

Mr. Don Foster: In view of the answer that the Secretary of State gave to the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), will he confirm to the House that a contract recently given for the delivery of the new deal in Hackney was given to Reed Personnel Services, that the head of that organisation is Alec Reed, and that that gentleman is alleged to have given £100,000 to the Labour party? Although I have no reason to believe that there was any impropriety whatever in that contract, can the Secretary of State confirm his support for the Prime Minister in acknowledging the urgent need to reform party political funding to remove even the whiff of impropriety in such arrangements?

Mr. Blunkett: I am very pleased that the hon. Gentleman believes that there is not a whiff of impropriety because if he did believe that, he should say it outside the House.

Let us make this absolutely clear. No Ministers were involved with the letting of the contract—that is an absolute, unequivocal statement. There are many people who have given, during the past few years, to all three political parties, who have subsequently, through their organisation or company, bid for Government contracts. There has been nothing wrong, and no one has previously suggested that there was anything improper or lacking in probity in the system that has been operated.

If any Opposition Members have anything to suggest about the way in which the civil service does its job, they should do so and we will examine those suggestions.

Mr. Reed: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the new deal scheme will work because it is a quality scheme and is widely supported by business, the voluntary sector and participating individuals, unlike the schemes that young people have suffered in the past decade? The youth opportunities programme, youth training, the youth training scheme, training for work: you name it, we have had it.

How does my right hon. Friend intend to ensure that young people—those who will benefit from this high-quality training—are involved in consultation leading up to the start of the new deal and, more important, how will he ensure that quality is maintained throughout its delivery?

Mr. Blunkett: Quality, continuity and accountability within the scheme are features which will distinguish the new deal from the programmes and schemes that the Conservatives introduced during their 18 years in office.

It is vital to make it possible for young people to play a part in monitoring and reviewing the programme, to say what they think about the programmes that they are engaged on and, where necessary, to redesign a system that is responsive. It is vital for us to set up outreach

facilities so that that can be done. I should like to suggest that young people should be part of the review teams; in that way, we can ensure that their interests and those of their age group can properly be reflected.

Mr. Willetts: Can the Secretary of State confirm a figure researched for me by the House of Commons Library, which tells me that a young person who is unemployed already has an 84 per cent. chance of moving off benefit within a year? How much better than that does he expect to do with his welfare-to-work scheme? Can he also confirm that it was one of his socialist heroes who said that socialism is about priorities? Does he really believe that putting £3.5 billion into a problem that is obviously shrinking is the right ordering of priorities when there are so many other pressures on his budget and elsewhere?

Mr. Blunkett: I do not believe that 15,000 to 20,000 youngsters a month reaching the point where they have been unemployed or out of education for more than six months is a minor problem, or something which should not be tackled by a Government who believe in the economic gains that can be made from investing in those young people—which I described a moment ago—and in the critical nature of social cohesion, which means that we must heal our communities instead of dividing them.

I believe that the investment is worth making. If only 10,000 young people were out of work for more than six months—as opposed to the 122,000 young people in that situation at present—it would be worth applying that money to provide life chances and heal the communities in which they live. Our investment will give young people the economic opportunity to earn their own living and pay back the Exchequer, rather than drawing on it through dependence.

7. **Mr. Barry Jones:** How many new deal welfare-to-work places he plans to create in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* the north-west in the next year; and if he will make a statement. [14326]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We shall offer help to everyone who becomes eligible for the new deal, and sufficient places will be available to meet that commitment. We are making very good progress in Wales, the north-west and elsewhere in planning and implementing the new deal. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Disability Rights launched the first of the pathfinder areas this morning.

Mr. Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that Wales's recovery from the great loss of steel and coal jobs still has a long way to go? This excellent scheme might provide a real lifeline to valleys and towns in Wales. Is my hon. Friend aware that in Deeside in my constituency far too many young people have aimless, hopeless lives and have no access to worthwhile work? Is there any way in which my hon. Friend might enlarge the scheme? He knows that we will never heal the wounds of Thatcherism until we give work and hope to our young people.

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend speaks from his deep commitment to his constituents, so many of whom have suffered as a result of the processes of industrial change. Shotton is in his constituency and Llanwern is in mine. Although his experience of these issues is much greater than mine, I well understand the trauma and the difficulty faced by steelworkers and their families who have lost their jobs and find it desperately difficult to gain new work opportunities.

Against that background, we attach much importance to the new deal for the long-term unemployed and to ensuring that a new generation of young people does not suffer the same experiences. We are determined to make a great success of our existing commitments under the new deal, and we shall see thereafter what remains to be done.

Mr. Keetch: Does the Minister recall the commitment that Labour gave before the election to help 250,000 long-term unemployed under-25s to receive the new deal? Will he comment on the figures supplied today by the Library which suggest that only 122,000 people qualify—

Madam Speaker: Order. The question relates to projects in Wales and the north-west. I have warned the House before that supplementary questions must follow the substantive question. I know that Hereford is not far from Wales, but I do not think that the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) will be able to get his question in order. If any other hon. Member wishes to speak about Wales or the north-west particularly, I shall call him or her—I thought not.

Higher Education (Scottish Universities)

9. **Miss McIntosh:** If he will make a statement on funding problems in respect of students resident in England studying at Scottish universities. [14328]

Dr. Howells: Many Scottish universities offer students with good A-levels the option of entering the second year of a four-year honours course, so it should be possible for students from England and Wales to get a Scottish degree after paying for the same number of years as they would have taken to graduate at a university elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Those from low-income families will get free tuition in any case.

Miss McIntosh: How will the Minister explain to students in Pontypridd and the Vale of York that they will be disadvantaged by having to pay £1,000 more than Scottish students to do the same course? Will he tell the House how Scottish universities might make up any shortfall if students who wish to do a four-year degree—as I did at the university of Edinburgh—are not in a financial position to do so? Will he invite the Prime Minister to intervene in the dispute between the Department for Education and Employment and the Scottish Office?

Mr. Fabricant: Be statesmanlike.

Dr. Howells: Thank you very much.

First, it is not the same course and, secondly, only the wealthiest students will have to pay the £4,000. The hon. Lady asked me what I will tell the students in Pontypridd. She can be sure that I shall not feed them the litany of half-truths and lies that I have heard so often on this subject.

Mr. Welsh: Does the Minister accept that the failure to exempt English, Welsh and Northern Irish students from

tuition fees in the final year of a Scots four-year honours course will deter potential students and cause academic and economic damage? Will he follow the good Scottish Office example, provide the funds and end the discrimination against English and other students?

Dr. Howells: I hope that the hon. Gentleman listened to the reply that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave on the subject earlier. There are Scottish universities that already accept students with two good A-levels into the second year of four-year honours courses. I hope that they will continue to do so and that many other universities in Scotland will follow their example.

Secondary Schools (Hertfordshire)

10. **Ms Ward:** What measures he proposes for the improvement of the present admissions procedure to secondary schools in the Hertfordshire area. [14329]

Mr. Blunkett: New admissions criteria will provide for a genuine partnership to get schools to work together with their education authority, to ensure that we overcome the scandal of some parents finding that they do not have places for their children in September, because they have had to make multiple applications in a chaotic system, such as my hon. Friend must suffer in parts of Hertfordshire.

Ms Ward: I thank my right hon. Friend for his acknowledgement of the problems in Hertfordshire. Is he aware that many parents in my constituency of Watford have serious concerns about the forthcoming round of selections by academic ability, which will result in some children not obtaining a place in any school of their choice, and the subsequent emotional effect on the children? Will he assure me that, in any forthcoming legislation, he will take into account the specific difficulties that face Watford and south-west Hertfordshire in the admissions process for secondary schools?

Mr. Blunkett: I will give my hon. Friend the absolute assurance that we will do so. Parents and children deserve a system that meets their needs and in which their preference is respected, rather than the school choosing the pupil, and chaotic multiple admissions systems that result in children failing to have a place, and therefore failing to have the opportunity that others take for granted.

Mr. Dorrell: Can the Secretary of State clear up a misunderstanding which was raised with me when I was in a Hertfordshire school last week? Does the right hon. Gentleman remember telling the Labour party conference that, under a Labour Government, there would be no return to selection? Will he confirm to the House that his White Paper makes it clear that specialist schools will be able to give priority to children who demonstrate a special aptitude? Can the Secretary of State make it clear to the House and the people of Hertfordshire what made him change his mind, or is there a difference between selection and giving priority to those who demonstrate aptitude?

Mr. Blunkett: The right hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends know perfectly well that recognising an aptitude for music is entirely different from selecting a child by the 11-plus examination. We all know that the commitment that I have given on selection stands. It will stand. The admissions criteria that I will publish, and the Bill that we will pass through Parliament, will ensure that every child has the opportunity to use his or her talents to the full.

Special Needs

11. **Mr. Bercow:** What recent representations he has received concerning the special educational needs of children. [14330]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Estelle Morris): We are beginning to receive responses to the Green Paper "Excellence for all Children", which was published on 22 October. I look forward to hearing from a wide range of interests during consultation on the Green Paper.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the Minister for that reply. Does she recognise that the policy of integrating children in special schools in mainstream education must have strict limits to it, for there are children whose presence in the classroom would be detrimental to the education of their peers? That point has been regularly impressed upon me by teachers in the 21 schools in the Buckinghamshire constituency that I have visited since 1 May.

Ms Morris: Of course I recognise that, and the Green Paper recognises it as well. There are some pupils for whom it is more appropriate, in their interests and in the interests of children who might be educated in the same class, that they go to a special school, perhaps for a short time, and not always for the whole of their career. Throughout the country, there are good examples of schools that include children with disabilities and children with special needs in mainstream classes. We want to encourage that. There are good reasons why, wherever possible, children who are deemed to have special educational needs should be educated with children of their age in mainstream classes. We will encourage that by spreading good practice and by reversing the cut that the Conservative Government made to the money available to schools to make the adaptations necessary for access.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Will the Minister confirm that there needs to be better teacher training so that teachers are able to identify more quickly children who have special needs such as dyslexia and autism? It is important that those children's needs are dealt with earlier.

Ms Morris: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. It is sad that many children who go through the school system with the designation of SEN would have had different levels of attainment had their special needs been recognised at an early stage. We should be trying to recognise children with special difficulties even before they start school.

That is why in our early years development plans, which we have recently launched, we have insisted that, when local authorities and others plan places for children under five, they listen to those with expertise in SEN so

that the identification to which the hon. Gentleman referred can be made early and immediate action taken to support those children. If we get that right, many of the problems that surface later in a school career will not surface.

Mrs. Browning: When the Minister announces the outcomes of the review of special educational needs and whatever changes she decides to make, will she confirm that there will be no diminution in the current protection that the individual child has under the law—I stress "under the law"—and that existing statutes will be maintained?

Ms Morris: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. We have not suggested that the rights of a child or a parent will be changed by some of the ideas that we have put forward. The hon. Lady's supplementary question gives me the opportunity to say that parents will retain the right to seek a statement, if that is what they feel that their child needs, and to go before a tribunal.

The hon. Lady must remember, however, that, for every parent who is pushed into having to obtain a statement to get the help that his or her child needs, time and money are involved which could be better used in supporting the child without having to go through the statementing process. If there are any changes to legislation that emerge from our consultations on the Green Paper, we shall make a statement to the House.

Lifelong Learning (Coalfields)

12. **Mr. Ennis:** What assessment he has made of the coalfields learning initiative partnership; and if he will make a statement on the long-term financial security of grassroots lifelong learning projects in coalfield areas. [14331]

Dr. Howells: It is too early to form an assessment of the coalfields learning initiative partnership, but we welcome its provision of adult education learning opportunities in former coalfield areas. Lifelong learning and the creation of a learning society are at the heart of our education and training policies.

Mr. Ennis: Projects within the partnership have been an excellent vehicle for driving forward the Government's commitment to lifelong learning processes and the reduction of unemployment, especially in places such as the Acorn centre in Grimethorpe in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that such schemes are now established as a key component of post-16 education in the coalfield areas? Will he make the Further Education Funding Council aware of their success?

Dr. Howells: My hon. Friend has drawn the attention of the House to an important project which is operating in a hard-hit area. Indeed, nowhere has been hit harder than Grimethorpe. I know that my hon. Friend is doing an excellent job in representing the interests of his constituents.

I hope that the partnership will look to European structural funds for support and examine every opportunity to use partnership approaches for funding in future when the present arrangements come to an end. I shall certainly bring my hon. Friend's suggestion to the FEFC's attention.

Church Schools

13. **Mr. Waterson:** What proposals he has for further support for Church schools; and if he will make a statement. [14333]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr. Stephen Byers) *rose—*

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Byers: Thank you so much. I felt the same myself.

We have had detailed discussions with the Churches about the new school framework. We recently announced developments to that framework to meet representations made by the Churches, with a view to safeguarding the ethos of Church schools within an education service based on partnership and co-operation. I am pleased to say that the Churches have welcomed those developments.

Mr. Waterson: I notice that it has taken until nearly 3.20 pm for the Minister for School Standards to make it to the Dispatch Box.

Will the Minister assure the House that voluntary-controlled schools will be able to opt to become aided schools sooner rather than later, and that if they do so they will not have to pay retrospective compensation to local education authorities?

Mr. Byers: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman came into the Chamber at 3.15 pm. I was getting worried that I would not have a single question to answer.

The Government have listened to representations made by the Church authorities, in the light of which the Bill will be revised. The Government are prepared to take on board the views expressed by other parties because we know that any changes that we introduce will mean a better Bill which will serve the interests of the nation's children—unlike the previous Conservative Government whose policies were based on arrogance and dogma, who did not listen and who, as a result, were rejected on 1 May.

New Deal

14. **Ms Drown:** How he will ensure that small and medium enterprises are able to be involved in the Government's new deal to help young people move from welfare to work. [14334]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Small and medium businesses are crucial to the success of the new deal. We are working hard to secure their involvement by reflecting their views in the design and delivery of the new deal, by helping them through local partnerships and by targeting national promotion to encourage their further involvement.

Ms Drown: I welcome that response. Swindon has fewer young unemployed people than many other parts of Britain; nevertheless, they are a priority for the business community and the Employment Service. Swindon is

aware of the Government's larger welfare-to-work programme and wants it to succeed, but the current welfare-to-work programme requires each area to go forward at the same rate. Will my hon. Friend consider bringing forward some parts of the scheme so that, from April, which is sooner than currently planned, areas such as Swindon can move forward to help the long-term unemployed and lone parents, particularly the long-term unemployed?

Mr. Smith: The programme for the long-term unemployed will start in June. I thank my hon. Friend for her constituency work in promoting the new deal. She refers to the particularly acute needs of some of those eligible for the new deal programme in her constituency. In that regard, the gateway provision is crucial, providing personal support, assessment, mentoring and help with basic skills, and it will be brought forward as quickly as possible to help the constituents of my hon. Friend and others.

Mr. Brady: Given that the Government apparently believe that the job subsidy under the new deal will create more jobs in small and medium enterprises, is it not obvious and unavoidable that the introduction of the minimum wage will cost jobs?

Mr. Smith: The new deal will result in extra employment opportunities in small and medium enterprises precisely because the prospect of that subsidy and support in obtaining a trained and ready-to-work young person can make a critical difference to whether someone is taken on. The Low Pay Commission will recommend the level of the minimum wage, taking full account of employment needs. Rather than carping about the new deal, the hon. Gentleman, like so many other hon. Members, should get behind it in his constituency to end the scandal of long-term youth unemployment and help business.

Universities (Financial Support)

15. **Dr. Kumar:** If he will make a statement on the level of financial support for universities in 1998–99. [14336]

Dr. Howells: We have taken decisive action to deal with the serious funding problems facing universities. For 1998–99, my right hon. Friend has announced that an extra £165 million will be spent on higher education, including an extra £125 million to enable universities and colleges to maintain and improve quality and standards, and to make a start on the backlog of maintenance and equipment replacement.

Dr. Kumar: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply. The Secretary of State's announcement of £165 million for higher education is a tremendous support. Will my hon. Friend seriously consider one aspect of the Dearing report which has been overlooked? Universities face a crisis in funding for research, infrastructure and equipment, for which £400 million to £500 million is required. I urge him to reconsider the funding proposals or make additional funding available.

Dr. Howells: We are examining the issue carefully. We are worried about the fact that some colleges and universities have closed important research sectors in their institutions. We are talking to colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry and in other Departments concerned with this issue, and we shall ensure that this country retains an excellent research base.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the Minister confirm that he has already taken the decision to withdraw from local education authorities the power to make discretionary awards to students in higher education? Why has he done that without proper consultation? Is he aware that, in taking away those discretionary awards, he is also taking away the student's right to the appeal process? In Surrey county, that process has enabled up to 40 per cent. of students to get at least part of the award for which they had applied.

Dr. Howells: We have made no such decision; nor have we made any such announcement.

New Deal

16. **Dr. Stoate:** What has been the response of employers to the new deal for young unemployed people. [14337]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Employers across the country are responding positively to the new deal by pledging support, and by following up those pledges with practical action.

Dr. Stoate: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply; it will be good news to young, unemployed people in my constituency of Dartford and elsewhere. Does he agree with me that the new deal allows employers to address the skills shortage, which causes so much damage to British competitiveness?

Mr. Smith: Absolutely. This is the right time to introduce the new deal. It maximises the opportunities for young, unemployed people to obtain work, and it helps business by ensuring that young people are equipped with skills and are prepared for work, so that they can develop their training towards a recognised qualification while in employment. That will benefit my hon. Friend's constituents and thousands of others across the country.

Mr. Rowe: Does the Minister agree that, as a result of the steadily falling unemployment inherited from the previous Government, the proportion of young people who require the scheme and who are very disadvantaged, because of their social background, lack of education or other skill shortages, is growing? None of those people will be attractive to employers. Will the Minister give us an assurance that the time taken to get those young people up to the threshold at which most other young people start such schemes will be extended, so that they are on a level playing field and can benefit from the scheme?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I appreciate the understanding and sensitivity that he shows towards the young unemployed in his constituency, and towards the programme. As the overall numbers fall, those in particular need constitute a greater proportion. That is why the gateway period of up to four months of assessment, counselling and help with basic

skills is so important. It also gives people the opportunity to try tasters of the different options available through the new deal.

In response to consultation over the summer, the Government have introduced another opportunity, whereby young people with particularly acute needs can, after the gateway period, have three months' intensive basic education and skills training, before going on to employment.

This is all about enhancing the employability of young people. It is founded on the good and wise principle that those who most need it will receive the greatest help.

Degree Courses

17. **Mr. Ilsley:** What representations he has received regarding proposals to restrict colleges to offering degree courses by only one validating university. [14338]

Dr. Howells: We have received a wide range of responses to the recommendation by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education on the issue. The Government will announce its response to that and other recommendations soon.

Mr. Ilsley: I thank my hon. Friend for his reply.

My constituency has benefited greatly from Barnsley college's ability to offer degree courses franchised through both Sheffield and Leeds universities. The benefits to my constituency, not only educational but social, have been very welcome. May I therefore ask my hon. Friend to reject the Dearing recommendation, and allow colleges such as mine to continue to franchise degrees through more than one university?

Dr. Howells: As my hon. Friend probably knows, the majority of the responses received so far to Sir Ron Dearing's proposals have been opposed to multiple franchising, or serial franchising as it is sometimes called, arguing that it should be stopped. They recognise, however, that there might be occasions when, for geographical or subject-related reasons, that would be impossible. I am sure that my colleagues will consider the matter carefully when we formulate our responses to Sir Ron's proposals.

Business of the House

3.30 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South–West Norfolk): May I ask the Leader of the House to give next week's business?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): The business for next week will be as follows.

MONDAY 17 NOVEMBER—Opposition Day [4th allotted day] [first part].

Until 7 pm, there will be a debate entitled "Public Services Under Threat" on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

Motion to approve the seventh and eighth reports from the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges.

TUESDAY 18 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 19 NOVEMBER—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Consideration in Committee of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill [first day].

THURSDAY 20 NOVEMBER—Motion to take note of the outstanding reports of the Public Accounts Committee to which a Government reply has been given. Details will be given in the *Official Report.*

FRIDAY 21 NOVEMBER—Debate on the review of civil justice and legal aid on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows.

MONDAY 24 NOVEMBER—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill.

TUESDAY 25 NOVEMBER—Second Reading of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 NOVEMBER—Until 2 pm, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Until about 7 pm, Third Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill.

Remaining stages of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Bill *[Lords].*

Consideration of Lords amendments to the Plant Varieties Bill.

THURSDAY 27 NOVEMBER—Consideration in Committee of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill [first day].

FRIDAY 28 NOVEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The House will also wish to know that on Wednesday 19 November there will be a debate on transmissible spongiform encephalopathies: controls on cattle, sheep and goats, in European Standing Committee A, and a debate on the draft general budget for 1998 in European Standing Committee B, as I announced last week.

The House will also wish to know that it is proposed that on Tuesday 25 November there will be a debate on biotechnological inventions in European Standing Committee B, and on Wednesday 26 November there will be a debate on food law in European Standing Committee A.

Details of the relevant documents will be given in the *Official Report.*

I remind the House that all Members may attend a European Standing Committee, and participate in questions to the Minister and in the debate that follows.

[Wednesday 19 November:

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Community document: 10040/97, TSE: Prohibition of Risk Material. Relevant European Legislation Committee reports: HC 15-iii (1997–98) and HC 155-iv (1997–98).

European Standing Committee B—Relevant European Community documents: 10153/97, Draft General Budget 1998; PE 262.699, 1998 Budget. Relevant European Legislation Committee reports: HC 155-iv (1997–98) and HC 155-vi (1997–98).

Tuesday 25 November:

European Standing Committee B—Relevant European Community document: 10510/97, Biotechnological Inventions. Relevant European Legislation Committee report: HC 155-v (1997–98).

Wednesday 26 November:

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Community documents: 8150/97, Food Law; 8386/97, Consumer Health and Food Safety. Relevant European Legislation Committee reports: HC 155-ii (1997–98) and HC 155-v (1997–98).

Thursday 20 November:

Debate on a motion to take note of the outstanding reports of the Public Accounts Committee. Relevant reports:

Reports Session 1996–97

Report No:	*Title*	*HC No.*	*Publication Date*
1	The office of Gas Supply: The Regulation of Gas Tariffs (The Gas Cost Index)	37	14 November
2	Progress in Completing the New British Library	38	20 November
3	The Sale of the Mining Operations of the British Coal Corporation	60	21 November
4	The Construction of Quarry House	69	27 November
5	Highways Agency: The Bridge Programme	83	28 November
6	The Audit of European Community Transactions	84	4 December
7	The Hospital Information Support Systems Initiative	97	5 December
8	Information Technology Services Agency: Outsourcing The Service Delivery Operations	98	11 December
9	Resource Accounting and Proposals for a Resource-based System of Supply	167	15 January
10	Excess Vote NI DHSS		19 February
11	Excess Votes Classes I, IV, VII, XIII, XIV, XVII (7&13)	293	13 February
12	ODA: Turkish Universities Equipment Project	70	27 February
13	H M Treasury: The Second Sale of Shares in National Power and PowerGen	151	6 March

Report No:	*Title*	*HC No.*	*Publication Date*
14	Dept for Education & Employment: Financial Control of Payments made under the Training for Work and Youth Training Programmes in England	61	13 March
15	The Award of the First Three Passenger Rail Franchises	39	13 March
16	Office of Electricity Regulation, Office of Gas Supply: The Work of the Directors General of Telecommunications, Gas Supply, Water Services and Electricity Supply	89	19 March
17	Health of the Nation: A Progress Report	85	20 March
18	National Savings: Financial Reporting	214	25 March
19	Former Yorkshire Regional Health Authority	432	26 March
20	Payments to the National Lottery Distribution Fund	99	27 March
21	The Management of Space in Higher Education Institutions in Wales	159	2 April
22	British Rail Maintenance Limited: The Sale of Maintenance Depots	168	3 April
23	Ministry of Defence: The Financial Management of the Military Operation in the Former Yugoslavia	242	4 April
24	Department of Transport: Freight Facilities Grants in England	284	8 April
25	Plymouth Development Corporation: Regularity Propriety and Control of Expenditure	450	8 April
REPLIES			
	Treasury Minute on the First to Eighth Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts 1996–97	CM 3559	12 February 1997
	Treasury Minute on the Ninth Report from the Committee of Public Accounts 1996–97	CM 3577	12 March 1997
	Treasury Minute on the Twelfth to Twenty-Fifth Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts 1996–97	CM 3714	16 July 1997

Mrs. Shephard: I thank the right hon. Lady for her reply. It helps the House to be given two weeks' business, and to hear the fuller statements that she is giving.

The right hon. Lady will recall that the Prime Minister said yesterday that he would set out the Government's position on the tobacco sponsorship ban with "enthusiasm and relish". As he apparently omitted some information, which has since emerged overnight, will she arrange an early opportunity for him to set out the Government's position with not only enthusiasm and relish, but completeness?

Does the right hon. Lady agree that, if the Secretary of State for Health had bothered to make a statement to the House about Government policy on tobacco sponsorship, as he should have done, instead of announcing it outside, and if the Minister for Public Health had done the House the courtesy of informing it of the Government's change of policy on the matter, as she should have done, instead of announcing it on the "Today" programme, the Government not only might have avoided much of the bother that they have created for themselves over the affair, but would have demonstrated that they have, after all, some regard for parliamentary democracy and convention?

As the right hon. Lady may know, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) said yesterday on the Jimmy Young programme that it is the Minister without Portfolio who is running the Labour party. If she agrees with her hon. Friend, perhaps she could arrange for the Minister to appear at the Dispatch Box slightly more frequently than once every six months and for slightly longer than five minutes. She will know that last Monday's occasion was a terrible disappointment to the House. Given the great role ascribed to the Minister by the hon. Member for Brent, East, surely the House should be given more ample opportunity to question him.

Will the right hon. Lady make a statement to the House to confirm, or otherwise, that a substantial amount of office accommodation in the Cloisters, which was formerly used by hon. Members, has now been allocated to something called the parliamentary Labour party resource centre? If that is so, is not the taxpayer subsidising the Labour party's political activities within the House? Is not the centre taking up much needed office space, which should be for the use of elected Members of Parliament, including Labour Members?

Mrs. Taylor: I hope to be able to give two weeks' notice of business quite often. I cannot promise to do it on all occasions, and the second week's business will be provisional, of course, but I undertake to try to give as much notice of business as possible, and I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her comments.

On the Prime Minister's answers yesterday, I do not think that there was a question asked by a Conservative Member that he did not answer fully, completely and enthusiastically. I am not sure which information the right hon. Lady thinks has come to light overnight. Does the Conservative party want to criticise the Labour party for taking an open donation, for giving back a donation and for refusing a donation? Other hon. Members might like a debate on all political funding in the past few years. For Conservative Members to complain about tobacco advertising is a bit of a cheek, as they never lifted a finger to tackle that problem.

On the right hon. Lady's comments about my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), I do not have time to listen to the Jimmy Young programme, so I missed his comments, but if she accurately reported what he said, on this occasion, he is mistaken. We have ample opportunity to question the person who is running the country—the Prime Minister.

The right hon. Lady is right to say that the resource centre is now in office accommodation in the Cloisters, having vacated its previous room to accommodate the needs of an hon. Member.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Will my right hon. Friend take on board the idea of having several debates about political funding because, contrary to the view that is expressed by a few Tories as of now, it would help us considerably to take the lid off all those donations to the Tory party when it was in government?

It was not a full statement yesterday by the Opposition because they omitted to mention that they had received £14 million from Bernie Ecclestone and did not give it back. Also, they made no mention of the money that they received from a crook, Asil Nadir, who gave them £440,000 which they did not give back. What is more, it has now come to light that they received more than £1 million from a Hong Kong family dealing in heroin. The money was made out of heroin dealing and was used to help them with their election campaign. It is time to lift the real lid.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is making a strong case for a debate such as he mentioned; we could make good use of parliamentary time on such issues. My problem is that we have such a crowded programme. However, issues such as this will not go away and will be aired at some time in some place.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Will the Leader of the House switch her attention from contaminated donations to contaminated land? Is she aware that there have been conflicting statements in the past few days from Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions? The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning said that he still expects to be able to site development to the tune of 50 per cent. on brown land rather than taking green-field sites, whereas the Minister for the Environment said that the work that should be undertaken to decontaminate contaminated land cannot go forward, because the Treasury cannot afford the very small sum—£14 million—that is necessary to progress that programme. May we be assured that there will be a Green Paper, a statement and a debate on the Government's intentions with regard to the development of green-field and brown-field sites in the near future?

Mrs. Taylor: I think that the hon. Gentleman knows that the Government are committed to protecting the countryside and to helping regenerate towns and cities and provide the housing that is required. It is always a difficult balance under any Government. Each case has to be decided on its merits. I know that the specific problem of decontamination is very difficult, because there are often technical as well as financial problems. I cannot promise the hon. Gentleman time for a debate, but I shall bring his concerns to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): May I press my right hon. Friend on the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)? May we have a debate on the Ecclestone contributions? We are told that he paid £10 million to the Tories and lent them £4 million. It is either true or not true. If it is true, surely an Opposition Member should come to the Dispatch Box, admit that it is true and tell us what the Opposition did in return for that money. What did they do for the money?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend again tempts me to agree to a debate on the issue that he mentioned. I see the strength of that case, not least because I recall the many occasions on which I and my hon. Friends sat on the Opposition Benches asking that the Nolan committee be allowed to look at those issues before the election. Had that happened, this information would have come to light much earlier.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): May I offer the right hon. Lady a constructive suggestion? We should have a rolling debate on political donations, starting with a debate on the moralistic posturings of a political party that makes high-sounding noises about these matters, and going on with a continuing debate so that each time a revelation is dragged out of the Government by the media, we can debate that new fact.

Mrs. Taylor: I have to remind the right hon. Gentleman that Members of the previous Parliament of course had opportunities to vote for complete openness on political donations. I cannot remember him joining us in the Lobby.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the performance of the west coast main line? As she will be aware, I have a special interest in that. I attended the press conference in March, when Virgin was awarded the franchise. Given all the private companies, I welcomed that. We were told that there would be 90 per cent. reliability in a year. This month, we have found out that the line is the worst performing railway in the country.

The journey from London to my constituency takes four hours. Last week, a train took nine hours. Earlier in the week, a train did not start out for Carlisle because the company forgot to roster a driver. The situation is getting worse.

I appreciate that the problems are not all Virgin's—many of them are Railtrack's. Unless the problems are put right, Cumbria will not be able to exist as an economic unit until we have the tilting train and the 140 mph train in seven years' time. We need action now.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend raises a problem which is clearly of great concern to him and his constituents. It must be very depressing to be told that the line is the worst in the country and to endure experiences such as those that he described. I am sure that my hon. Friends in the relevant Department—and, indeed, the Rail Regulator—are aware of the problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) has made a strong case for highlighting the problem, but I am afraid that I cannot find time for a debate in the near future.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): The right hon. Lady will know that, although six months have elapsed since the election, we do not yet have the Register of Members' Interests. May we have a debate to help hon. Members understand the rules? Under current rules, all of us must declare the amount and the donor concerning any outside interest or any funding of our private political offices.

The Leader of the House will know that current advice from the registrar is that blind trusts do not mean that such information need not be put into the public domain. Two right hon. Members, who are now the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, received money in that way. Such information needs to be published to conform with the rules of the House. We need a debate so that

[Mr. Ian Bruce]

matters can be brought out into the open. Otherwise, everyone could claim to have received—or be accused of having received—contributions from blind trusts.

Mrs. Taylor: On the last point, I remind the hon. Gentleman that he and his hon. Friends tried to make that point during the previous Parliament, and it was established without doubt that my right hon. Friends obeyed the rules that were in place at that time. It is important that all hon. Members understand the rules. The forms sent out and the advice available are very clear. Of course, we now also have a code of conduct. The register will be published later this month.

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): May we have an early debate on the hazards of laser pointers? On Friday, the eyes of a young girl in my constituency were damaged in her school playground by a laser used by another pupil. The Trading Standards Authority told me that, of the 49 laser pointers that it has tested, fewer than 5 per cent. were safe. It also told me that some of the type 2 lasers that it had taken were in fact type 3 and hazardous. It is very concerned about that. As the House will understand, I, too, am very concerned about the hazards to children in my constituency.

Mrs. Taylor: I sympathise with the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent. To have somebody hurt in such a way in the school playground must be extremely alarming. I know that, in my constituency, a bus driver found himself under threat because of the misuse of laser pointers.

The police already have the power to consider laser pointers as offensive weapons when they are used in such a way. My hon. Friend the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs announced on 28 October that he was urging trading standards departments to use their powers under 1994 regulations to remove dangerous laser pens and pointers from sale. If there is a problem with classification, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) has indicated, I shall ensure that my hon. Friend the Minister is aware of the potential problem.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): In the light of press reports that the Government will appoint a commission to consider proportional representation, may we have a statement so that hon. Members who have experience of the two forms of PR elections held in the United Kingdom may contribute to the debate?

Mrs. Taylor: The electoral commission has not yet been appointed; nor have its terms of reference yet been made public or, indeed, completed. I know that some hon. Members have experience of PR, and in the next few months that matter will probably be debated on several occasions.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): As a little, bald-headed, man in his sixties, with glasses and false teeth and whose trousers do not match his jacket, I may seem an unlikely moderniser. However, I wish to press my right hon. Friend to consider having a debate on modernisation in Government time—although on a different subject from the debate that we are about to have—to discuss a modern, technologically up-to-date electoral registration system, including rolling registers; access to polling stations for disabled people; the measure that I introduced yesterday to ensure the registration of homeless people; whether expatriates should be excluded from the register; and whether people resident in this country, from outside the Commonwealth and the Republic of Ireland, should also be on our electoral registers, as they are part of our society and pay their taxes here.

Mrs. Taylor: I have no problems in thinking of my hon. Friend as a moderniser, especially on that subject, because he has campaigned for a significant time for changes, with much justification. I am sure that improvements can be made in the system of registration, and a review is currently examining what can be done. My hon. Friend may have heard my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and Housing say only this week that, together with local authorities, she is now examining the possibility of using different types of buildings, including possibly supermarkets, as centres for voting, to make it easier for people to exercise their democratic rights. I do not know whether that is too modern for my hon. Friend, but I hope that he appreciates that much thought is going into the subject.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): The House will have noted the right hon. Lady's reluctance to grant a debate on the funding of political parties and drawn conclusions from that. May I suggest that we might discuss another funding matter—the funding of local authorities? Her colleagues in shire halls and town halls up and down the country are greatly concerned about the likelihood that the funding for local authorities will be infinitely less generous under this Government than under the previous Administration. The title for the debate could be "Rate Capping", given the commitment in the Labour party manifesto to abolish rate capping and the more recent confirmation from the Minister for Local Government and Housing that the Government intend to abolish crude and universal capping. May we have a debate on that subject?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not at all reluctant to find time to debate the funding of political parties. The problem is that we have a crowded programme and, although several of my hon. Friends have pointed out why we should be tempted to have such a debate, we have little time to do so.

There will be a statement before Christmas about the funding of local authorities, and the hon. Gentleman may be able to participate in that. Many local authorities are very grateful for the extra money for education that the Government have been able to find.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, giving time to make progress on the measure to restore democratic government to London. She will know that when the Greater London council was abolished, the responsibility for the local authority housing in Thamesmead and for all the development land and other assets was transferred to a private development company. The assurances about community participation in the company given by the Minister at the time—the right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire (Sir G. Young)—have been broken. My right hon. Friend may know that in the past few weeks,

directors elected to represent the community have been hounded out of office after being forced to take polygraph tests. Will she find time for a debate on the future of Thamesmead, the restoration of democracy to the democracy-free zone of Thamesmead and the abolition of Thamesmead Town Ltd.?

Mrs. Taylor: I am not aware of the details of the situation to which my hon. Friend refers, and I am not sure whether it is within the scope of the measure that I announced we are to debate next week. He may consider such a topic to be suitable for an Adjournment debate.

Mr. Andrew Welsh (Angus): Is the Leader of the House aware that the Scottish Office released the report "Government Expenditure and Revenue for Scotland" this morning and held a private press briefing? That report is not yet available from the Vote Office or the Scottish Office, in spite of repeated requests by hon. Members. Will she ensure that those matters are dealt with in the House and not at private press briefings?

Mrs. Taylor: I shall look into that.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is there not a case for having an early debate on political party funding? Would it not be useful? Such a debate would show us whether the Conservative Opposition are in favour of disclosing in full all those who donate large sums to political parties, whether they are in favour of a ban on foreign donations and whether they take the view, as we do, that there should be a cap on the amount that can be spent in general elections—just as there is in constituency campaigning, where there is no controversy. Throughout the 18 years when many of us made proposals—through ten-minute Bills and questions—the Conservative Government were totally opposed to any reform of political funding. The Conservatives are about the last people in the world who should give us lectures.

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend is quite right, and he is consistent. He was one of those who, in the previous Parliament, on several occasions raised the question whether political funding should be referred to the Nolan committee. Had our frequent requests been granted, the Conservative party's problems with political party funding might not have occurred.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid–Norfolk): Will the Leader of the House return to a question put by the shadow Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard)? After questions to the Secretary of State for culture and popular enlightenment on Monday, there was a five-minute slot to discuss the millennium experience and for the Minister without Portfolio to answer questions. We had waited six months, and many hon. Members on both sides wanted to ask legitimate questions. I and many others had never seen the Minister without Portfolio before, and thought that he was a figment of virtual reality—until I realised that I had seen him before. On Wednesday afternoons, he is the chap who plays peekaboo behind the Chair—like Kenneth Williams, frowning at Labour Members and saying, "Ooh, you are awful." This project involves millions of pounds and is supposed to be a national celebration of the millennium. We need the Minister responsible to come here more frequently than once every six months for five minutes.

Mrs. Taylor: The special slot for millennium questions was the result of popular demand. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister without Portfolio will be glad to know that he is so popular.

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): May I welcome the appointment of Chief Constable Keith Hellawell as co-ordinator of the Government's drugs initiative—an appointment which has been widely welcomed? Many of us wait with anticipation for his work to start, because drugs continue to be a significant problem, affecting many of our young people and associated with high levels of crime. When will my right hon. Friend be in a position to make a statement to the House on the terms of reference of his appointment, and on his immediate and long-term objectives and how he may set about achieving them?

Mrs. Taylor: There has been a significant welcome for Keith Hellawell's appointment. Whether we use the term drugs tsar or anti-drugs co-ordinator, it is an important role and his job will be to advise Government on how we can build on the current strategy. Drugs are a significant problem and do indeed wreck many people's lives and cause a great deal of criminal activity.

It is hoped that early in the new year Keith Hellawell will be able to publish more information and present reports to the Government. At present, he is still a chief constable, although he is spending some time on his new post, and certainly in preparation, and I hope that both sides of the House will welcome his appointment and agree that tackling drugs should not be a party political issue.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid–Sussex): Does the Leader of the House accept that the whole House should be truly shocked by the levity with which she treated the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid–Norfolk (Mr. Simpson) about questions on the millennium dome? Does not she think it incredible that we have not been granted a debate on the Floor of the House to allow us to test and probe the extent and nature of a project that will spend £750 million of taxpayers' money? Is not that completely improper in terms of parliamentary accountability?

Mrs. Taylor: We will not take any lectures from the hon. Gentleman, who was a member of a Government who did not believe in accountability at all.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): In the light of newspaper reports this morning that Conservative peers are planning to vote against key elements of the programme on which the Government were elected, will my right hon. Friend allow an early debate on the proposed abolition of the hereditary peerage? As there are murmurings that they may vote against a ban on hunting, will she act with some urgency, so that the hunters may feel what it is like to be hunted?

Mrs. Taylor: My hon. Friend raises an interesting issue. I am afraid that I cannot find time for such a debate in the near future, but I shall keep it in mind.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid–Kent): Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement next week

[Mr. Andrew Rowe]

to update us on the number of members of the Labour party elected to public office who are currently under suspension, and perhaps let us know what the party's target is for Christmas?

Mrs. Taylor: Internal Labour party matters are not a subject for debate in the House.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): May I renew my call for an early debate on the operation of the law of perjury? Does my right hon. Friend share my disquiet that, in the many months that have passed since Jonathan Aitken discontinued his libel action against *The Guardian*, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has spent only 35 days—that is one officer working for 35 days—investigating the serious allegations of perjury against that former Cabinet Minister and Conservative Member of Parliament? Is not there a pressing case for an early debate on the matter?

Mrs. Taylor: I do not think that I can find time for such a debate, but I shall draw my hon. Friend's comments to the relevant Ministers' attention.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Having listened to hon. Members' views, can the right hon. Lady confirm that the Prime Minister will make a statement to the House next week on the formula one fiasco, so that instead of continuing to pretend that his handling of the matter has been flawless and fooling no one, he can take the opportunity to show a little humility and strength of character by apologising to the House for his errors of judgment on the matter?

Mrs. Taylor: I do not think that there is any requirement for any apology for any errors of judgment. The decisions that were taken were the right decisions, taken for the right reasons.

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): My right hon. Friend may have noticed that at Question Time, many hon. Members expressed their concerns about higher education funding. She will also have noticed that yesterday in another place, there was a debate about preserving the grotesque overfunding of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Could not those matters be usefully brought together in a debate, so that right hon. and hon. Members who represent other universities and colleges of higher education can discuss how to redistribute that money?

Mrs. Taylor: As I do not read them out, my hon. Friend may not know that the debates next Wednesday morning include one on Oxford and Cambridge college fees.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I was surprised that the Leader of the House did not respond more favourably to earlier requests for an urgent debate on local government finance in the light of this morning's Audit Commission report, which shows a £1 billion shortfall in the local authority pension fund arising from the number of early retirements. It is projected in a few years to amount to some 12 per cent. of the local government salary bill. The Accounts Commission for Scotland suggests that the Government's changes to advance corporation tax will add 3.5 per cent. of the local authority salary bill to the cost of maintaining pension funds.

Mrs. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman is right that an awful lot of money is spent that way, but the liability has not built up since May. Local authority finances are debated in the House from time to time. The next significant discussion of such issues will be on a statement on what used to be the rate support grant settlement, which, as I said earlier, will be later this year.

BILL PRESENTED

Religious Discrimination

Mr. John Austin, supported by Mr. David Atkinson, Mr. Simon Hughes, Fiona Mactaggart, Mr. Terry Rooney and Mr. Marsha Singh, presented a Bill to make discrimination on grounds of religion unlawful; to outlaw incitement to religious hatred; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 30 January, and to be printed [Bill 82].

Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That Mr. John Butterfill, Dr Vincent Cable, Mr. Barry Gardiner, Mr. John MacGregor, Dr Nick Palmer, Dr Howard Stoate, Ms Gisela Stuart and Paddy Tipping be appointed Managing Trustees of the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund in pursuance of Section 1 of the Parliamentary and other Pensions Act 1987.—[*Mr. McFall.*]

4.6 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I wish to refer to the hon. Members who are to be appointed trustees, because it is important that something that has, historically, involved considerable battling over many years should be understood by the new trustees. I think that at least five of the eight came to the House at this year's general election.

I am in a happy position because what I am going to say cannot affect me, though it can affect a host of other Members. You will recall, Madam Speaker, that the Labour party won a famous victory by defeating a motion of the Conservative Government in July 1980. It was decided that the pension accrual rate should not be one sixtieth but one fortieth; in other words, that people who had served 20 years in the House could have half pensions. I am delighted to say that the right hon. Member for West Bromwich, West (Miss Boothroyd) marched arm in arm with me through the Division Lobby. New Members will not have realised that. Only one of the new trustees was here then.

I am glad that the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) is going to be a member, and I hope that he will chair it.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I could be wrong, but I believe that I am right. The right hon. Gentleman, whom we are pleased to see back in his place, said that the pensions position was 40 per cent., whereas it was reduced to 50 per cent. He said that 20 years' service provides half a pension, but he should have said 25 years' service.

Sir Peter Emery: I was trying to make it clear, so that nobody misunderstands, that, at that time, the referral was one sixtieth. We tried to reduce it to one fortieth so that 20 years' service would give a half pension. The Conservative Government refused to accept the motion of the House and came back, in February 1981, with all the Whips on and proceeded to refer back to one sixtieth. In July 1983, that was changed to an accrual of one fiftieth.

I simply remind hon. Members who will serve as trustees of the great and extensive service given by Mr. Morris, who chaired that Committee. He was a most distinguished Labour Member for many years and is now in another place, I am glad to say. His work in defence of hon. Members' pensions was considerable.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Does the right hon. Gentleman know whether the trustees can take evidence? If they can, is he suggesting that he might wish to give evidence?

Sir Peter Emery: I have never considered giving evidence to the trustees. They have prepared a whole host of work and it rests very much with the Chairman as to how to proceed. As the at least five of the trustees are new Members, and only one knows of the instances of which I am talking, I thought that the matter was extremely relevant. Sadly, I do not see all the hon. Members in the Chamber, but they should be able to see in *Hansard* the point that I am making about pensions so that they can bear it in mind in any future action.

I hope that the trustees will be successful, as the Labour party at the time was adamant about moving to one fortieth.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Not everybody.

Sir Peter Emery: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was in the Division Lobby with me. I have the Division list before me—

Madam Speaker: Order. We shall check up afterwards. It is not relevant to this debate.

Sir Peter Emery: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As long as I know that you were with me, that is all that matters.

I hope that the Leader of the House will ensure that the trustees understand this matter and can look into it to see whether the present Government will move in the direction that the Labour party urged on the House 17 years ago. Many new Members, who do not necessarily stand a chance of being in the House for more than 10, 15 or 20 years, need to ensure that their pension rights are better protected than at present. It is not exactly the same as in industry because nothing can be quite as problematical for a long stay than being in politics as a Member of Parliament.

It seemed worth while to raise this matter as we appoint hon. Members as trustees because it is imperative that they bear the matter in mind.

4.13 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I confess that I am disappointed that, given that this is the first opportunity that the House has had to debate this important matter—[HON. MEMBERS: "It is the second opportunity."] It is the first opportunity, because the Leader of the House withdrew the motion in a fit of pique the other night and would not let the House debate the matter.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Earlier this week, we debated the motion and the right hon. Gentleman spoke in that debate. I do not know how he can claim that this is the first opportunity to debate it.

Madam Speaker: Order. The debate was on the second motion.

Mr. Forth: Thank you for that clarification, Madam Speaker. The hon. Gentleman should have established his facts before getting to his feet.

As I was saying, this is the first occasion that we have had to debate this important matter, which relates directly to the interests of every Member of the House.

[Mr. Forth]

I am doubly disappointed because, so far, the Leader of the House has not sought to catch your eye, Madam Speaker, to explain to the House why the names that have been suggested for the managing trustees are such as they are. The right hon. Lady might have had a hint from the debate—however truncated it was—on Monday night that there was a certain amount of dissatisfaction about the nature of the names being offered, albeit in connection with a different matter.

Any hon. Members who were then present might recall that I expressed the view that, in these matters perhaps more than any other, it was vital that those to whom we give the trusteeship of our pensions or of the Members' fund should represent the widest possible range of Members of Parliament in terms of background, experience, and so on. I should have thought that that proposition was self-evident, but apparently it is not.

However, even now, the Leader of the House has not done us the courtesy of offering an explanation of the reasoning behind the proposed membership of the managing trustees of the parliamentary contributory pension fund. That is not an unreasonable request.

The matter should be uncontroversial. I should have thought that the Leader of the House would come to the House with some confidence and explain briefly the reasoning behind the nature of the appointments. I would hope that we would all then be satisfied and the matter could be dealt with swiftly but properly. None of that has happened. Instead, we had this and the other related matter brought before us late on Monday night, apparently on the assumption that they would slip through quietly on the nod. We did not even have the opportunity to have the full debate allowed on the Order Paper. I am therefore glad to see that now we have up to an hour and a half to debate each of these matters. That reflects the importance that should be attached to them.

In order to establish my point of reference, I obtained from the Vote Office a copy of the "Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund Accounts 1995–96". Helpfully, it states in paragraph 11:

"The Managing Trustees appointed in accordance with Section 1 of the 1972 Act by Resolution of the House of 22 May 1992 are"

and gives the names of the hon. Members in the previous Parliament who were the managing trustees of that important pension fund. Those members included, from the then Opposition, the right hon. Alfred Morris, who was the chairman, the right hon. Gordon Oakes—a senior and highly respected Member of Parliament—and the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), who is now the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, but who was at that time a relatively new Member.

The significant point is that the view taken by the then Opposition of the managing trustees was that it was appropriate that there should be a spread of experience, ranging from the hon. Member for Pontypridd to senior Members such as Gordon Oakes and Alfred Morris.

I should mention in passing that the Conservative trustees were none other than Sir Peter Hordern, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mrs. Roe), Sir James Spicer and Sir Gerard Vaughan. That gives some idea of the way in which the previous Parliament thought that the managing trustees should have experience, knowledge and wisdom about matters relating to the House, to Members of Parliament and to their pension fund. That is appropriate and I cannot recall anyone having any difficulty accepting that or any protests—everybody seemed to agree that that was the correct balance for that body of people.

One would have expected that in the present Parliament there would be a similar range of experience among Members to be appointed as managing trustees. You can imagine my shock and my disbelief, Madam Speaker, when I read the list of names that was first suggested to us a couple of nights ago. The Government seemed to have decided that Labour trustees would largely be newly elected Members.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours: How does the right hon. Gentleman know that a number of these people are not experts on pensions? Has he asked them?

Mr. Forth: That is a fair question.

Mr. Mike Wood (Batley and Spen): What is the answer?

Mr. Forth: The answer is that I do not know any of them because they have not been in this place long enough.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Incredible.

Mr. Forth: If the hon. Gentleman will do me the courtesy of allowing me to develop my argument—these are only my opening remarks—he will learn that I do not rest my case on such a matter as knowledge of pensions, important although it may be.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Ah!

Mr. Forth: As the hon. Gentleman invites me to, I shall digress a moment—staying in order, I hope.

I readily accept that it is relevant and important that some of the trustees should be Members who know about pensions. If such Members were also newly elected Members, I believe that that would be entirely appropriate, because I do not dispute the fact that a new Member, or even two of them, should serve as trustees to provide that perspective. My difficulty with the proposal is that there are so many of them, to the exclusion of Members with experience and long service in the House.

The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) obviously knows all those new Members intimately. I respect his judgment in that matter, and if he tells me that one or more of them are pensions experts, I welcome that. I welcome the fact that the trustees include a Member or Members with pension expertise.

The point at issue, however, is whether the trustees have sufficient understanding of the House, of the membership of the House, of the difficulties that may arise as Members serve in the House and, specifically, of the problems that might arise when Members reach pension age and become eligible for the different pension arrangements.

Mr. Winnick: On Monday night, I wondered whether the right hon. Gentleman was simply being obstructive;

I now realise that he genuinely wants the matter to be discussed. I shall not think otherwise unless I have reason to do so.

As I know many hon. Members from both sides of the House who served during the previous Parliament, I would be the last to question their integrity. Is there not a case, however, for saying that fresh blood entering the House—Members who are unlikely to receive pensions in the near future, and not just one or two of them—should be able to consider the matter?

If the majority of the Members who serve as trustees are likely to draw their pension in the next five or 10 years—I am not suggesting that that is the reason for their appointment—some people outside the House might take the view that they have a vested interest. I do not share that view, but there is an argument, which obviously the right hon. Gentleman does not accept, for having as trustees new Members who are unlikely to benefit from pension arrangements for many years.

Mr. Forth: That is a reasonable point of view, which I respect. It was not the view that we took in the previous Parliament or, as those with longer memories may agree, in previous Parliaments that I can recall. That view has not been taken until now. If it were suddenly the view of the House, that would be another matter.

I concede, as I did to the hon. Member for Workington, that there should be a balance of experience of trustees, and the point that the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) makes has some validity. I cannot go as far as he wants me to go and say that there should be a majority. I readily concede the principle that he has enunciated—the need to balance possible self-interest in the approach of pension age with distance from pension age.

I am arguing for some balance and breadth of representation among the trustees. From the beginning, I have believed that the names suggested by the Government go too much in one direction. As I have said, I regret that I do not know those individuals personally—I hope to get to know them well in the coming years if I am spared to survive in this place beyond another election or two. I am sure that some of those hon. Members will make a very valuable contribution—in terms of their expertise in pensions, the fresh views that they may bring to these matters or their distance from their pension entitlements. I readily concede those points.

However, the point at issue is whether the trustees should contain a breadth of representation. I hope that it is not too late to ask the Leader of the House to reconsider the matter and provide a better range of representation. I have no wish to obstruct this process: it is very much in my interests, and in the interests of all hon. Members, that the trustees should exist and function properly. That is even more important for the trustees of the Members' fund, which we are to discuss next.

I have no desire to be obstructive, but I have a strong wish to see the trustees constituted properly. I ask the Leader of the House—I hope reasonably—to re-examine the matter very quickly.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. On Tuesday night, I offered him the chance to discuss the matter further. I have received no representations about the issue—although one of his hon. Friends spoke to me about it. As I explained to him, those who serve as trustees are volunteers: we cannot conscript people to do such work. We have selected to serve as trustees people with some relevant experience. My hon. Friends the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) and for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) have made significant points in that regard.

When the trustees are appointed, I do not think that there will be any barrier to an expansion in numbers if it is felt that extra experience is needed. The House could ask other hon. Members whether they wished to serve. However, the Government do not conscript people to serve as trustees if they are not willing to do so. I do not think that that would be a useful way of doing things. I believe that the hon. Members chosen to serve have a great deal of experience between them and I have confidence in them. However, if other experience is needed, I do not have a closed mind to suggesting that the membership should be altered in the future.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that response, but I am a little disconcerted—I think that that is the right word. I shall not make any further inquiries about the matter and I accept the right hon. Lady's explanation at face value. However, I am surprised that apparently it was not possible to find, from more than 400 Labour Members of Parliament, hon. Members with more experience to serve as trustees.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: How does the right hon. Member know? He does not know what their experience is.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman raises the same issue from a sedentary position. I am talking about length of experience in the House, not pension experience. I am very surprised that, from more than 400 Labour Members—I concede that a number are occupied with Government responsibilities—it was apparently difficult to find hon. Members who entered the House in 1992, 1987 or whenever to serve as trustees.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I reinforce the point that the right hon. Gentleman has made. The vast majority of Labour Members with the experience of the kind to which he refers are either members of the Government—it would not be appropriate for Ministers to serve on the body—or fulfilling other very responsible roles on Committees of the House. I think that he would be somewhat disconcerted if we suggested that new Members should assume the chairmanship of Select Committees in order to free more experienced Members for this kind of work.

We cannot force people to do such work; we rely on volunteers. I have said that if other types of experience are considered necessary in the future, we will be happy to consider the proposal, but, at present, there are no hon. Members with the kind of experience that the right hon. Gentleman describes who are willing to serve as trustees.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. I am tempted, but I shall resist the temptation, to get into a side debate about whether new Members should be Chairmen of Select Committees. In that case, the freshness of view argument might indeed be relevant. It is an interesting

[Mr. Forth]

question whether old lags should always be Chairmen of Select Committees. We might return to it on another occasion.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) implied that there was a corollary: that new Members might have experience in pensions? Having just referred to the "Vacher Dod" guide, I see that one of the new Members is an economics lecturer, another is a general practitioner and a third was a translator before coming to the House. They offer nothing to the Committee, other than newness and freshness—no experience in the running of pensions or the organisation of the House. No doubt they will contribute later to the debate on modernisation of the House, and argue how sensible it would be to introduce clapping.

Mr. Forth: I am confused. I hope that, as a result of my hon. Friend's intervention, the hon. Member for Workington will seek to catch your eye, Madam Speaker, and explain why, with his intimate knowledge of his colleagues, he thinks that they have pensions experience that would be useful to the trustees. He suggested strongly that they had such experience. My hon. Friend suggests, from the information available to him, that that may be in doubt. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will put our minds at rest—

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The right hon. Gentleman does not know whether my hon. Friends were trustees. That would not be in the record to which the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) referred. As for the medical practitioner, there is a requirement that a medical practitioner should be a trustee. The fund may have to deal with people like me, who may at some stage want ill-health pensions.

Mr. Forth: I have no difficulty with any of that. If, as I said at the outset, we had been told briefly but carefully the rationale behind the names proposed, none of this discussion would have been necessary. If, for example, it had been explained that one of the trustees must be a general practitioner, that would have been sufficient. If it had been demonstrated that an hon. Member had relevant pensions experience, that might have been appropriate. If we could have found someone who was a new Member and a GP with pensions experience, we could have had the whole lot rolled into one.

It would have been helpful if, as a matter of public record, the House had been given such an explanation, but that explanation has still not been forthcoming. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for the information that it has apparently proved difficult—nay, impossible—to find Labour Members with the range of experience that I suggested was necessary.

I shall reflect on that. It was, and still is, in my mind to seek to divide the House on the matter, such is my strength of feeling about it. I sense that some of my hon. Friends want to make their contribution, and I shall reflect on what the Leader of the House said before making up my mind.

I hope that I have made my views clear, and that I have persuaded hon. Members present that the matter is important. At the very least, we now have a clearer view from the Leader of the House of the background and the possibilities that lie ahead of us.

4.33 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I have promised to help to secure the re-election of Gerry Malone as the hon. Member for Winchester and I am already late for that appointment. That being so, I shall not delay the House for long, but an important matter is before us.

I am glad that the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) intervened because he recognised, as a Labour Member, that the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) on Monday night and by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) tonight show that we, the Opposition, are not seeking to filibuster to delay Government business. After all, the next debate will focus on the modernisation of the House, which is a matter of concern to all hon. Members.

As my right hon. Friends have said, however, we are much concerned about the compositions of Committees. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I felt on Monday, in my anger, that we were faced with another example of the contempt with which the Government regard the House.

I had reason to take that view because I have raised on the Floor of the House the membership of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, of which the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) is a distinguished member. I felt it wrong that a Committee dealing with matters relating to past events and going much to the heart of Members' activities should be in the hands of those who had no experience of the House. It was not a particularly partisan point, but I would not claim to be completely green on that issue.

The issue arose to even greater extent when nominations as trustees for the pension fund appeared on the Order Paper to be rushed through on Monday night. Not one Government nominee had served in the House before May. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) had served for one Parliament. However, none of the Government Members nominated as trustees of the Members' fund has served in a previous Parliament. I realise, of course, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we are debating not the Members' fund but the contributory pension fund. I accept that one Labour nominee has served in a previous Parliament.

I am grateful to the Leader of the House for acknowledging that we had a brief conversation yesterday. I am grateful also to her for taking me into her confidence. I have breached that confidence because she raised the matter from the Dispatch Box. She said that those who appoint Members to act as trustees of the funds have had difficulty in persuading Labour Members, especially right hon. Members, to serve.

I find it extraordinary that a party that enjoys the largest representation in the House since the second world war cannot find within its ranks senior Members who have the time that is necessary to devote to such important work.

We are talking about what used to be called House of Commons matters in the old days, not party political matters. These are matters that unite Members across the

board, and they relate to the difficulties of leading the life of a Member, which involves balancing constituency obligations with House obligations and balancing commitments to the political process with the need to devote time to the family. These matters serve to bring Members together rather than to divide them. There is a need also to deal with financial matters.

Since I have been in this place, it has seemed to me that it has been agreed policy that matters such as those before us would be dealt with by the great and the good. I fear that there is now an absence of the great when we read the list of Labour nominees. I make no judgment on whether the new Members are good—those who are appearing for the first time—but they are not great, because they have not served in the House previously.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I recall hearing these arguments before. They are arguments that the previous Government used against the then Opposition Front Bench. They said that because Labour had not been in government for nearly 18 years we did not have the experience to go into government. There is a fine team of Ministers on the Treasury Bench that is competently running the affairs of the United Kingdom, and most of its members have had no previous ministerial responsibility. They have acquired their competence in a matter of months. What is the hon. Gentleman going on about? I think that he completely misunderstands what the debate is about.

Mr. Howarth: That is unbelievably rich coming from the hon. Gentleman. Surely he has been reading the papers lately. He must have seen the Government's catalogue of incompetence, which reached a pinnacle this week—I am sure that there will be many more pinnacles to conquer in the coming weeks—with the nonsense about sponsorship by tobacco companies. I shall not pursue that matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or you will stop me.

The Conservatives' argument in government that there was a lack of experience in the Labour party has, sadly, been fully confirmed since the new Government assumed office. The hon. Gentleman invites me to take a partisan approach when I was trying to be as non-partisan as possible. He always tries to tempt me, whether in the Chamber or the Tea Room, but he should resist or we shall stray from what I hope is common ground.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, it is not that we believe that Labour nominees lack the competence to deal with pension matters, but they have no range of experience. They may provide fresh blood, but, apart from the hon. Member for Sherwood, who has served one term, there is no one such as the hon. Member for Workington, who has served for a number of terms and understands how the House works.

On a House of Commons matter, it is important to understand how the House works, and one way in which Members understand how the House works and the pressure faced by them is by virtue by their length of service. Therefore, I do not cast aspersions on those hon. Members who have been appointed.

However, I return to my astonishment that, within the ranks of the 400 Labour Members, neither the hon. Member for Workington nor the hon. Member for Walsall, North could be persuaded to serve as trustees. The hon. Member for Walsall, North does sterling service with me on the Select Committee on Home Affairs, but I dare say that he could still find a slot in his diary to help out as a trustee.

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

Mr. Howarth: Is the hon. Gentleman volunteering?

Mr. Winnick: I am not volunteering. The hon. Gentleman refers to Labour Back Benchers with many years of experience. Leaving my position aside, is it not of interest that all those Labour Members have various positions of responsibility, including—I do not wish to embarrass him—my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who is chairing an important Committee. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) is a member of that Committee and of another Committee which carries some responsibility.

Unfortunately, I was not in the Chamber when the hon. Gentleman started his speech, but I know that he understands some of my arguments. Unless he can show that those senior Labour Members to whom he refers are not pulling their weight in Committee and in the Chamber—we know the work undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)—he is weakening his case.

Mr. Howarth: I am flattered that the hon. Gentleman should consider me qualified to appoint senior Labour Members of the great and the good. That is not my duty and I think that he would regard it as presumptuous of me were I so to do. However, the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) is in his place. I am sure that he has time to spare. He joined the House at the same time as I did in 1983. He and I find time to share holy communion from time to time and I am sure that he could be persuaded to serve on behalf of the House.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I was a trustee of two pension funds before I became a Member of the House. I have every confidence in those Labour Members who have been appointed to represent us. I am serving on the Modernisation Committee and the Ecclesiastical Committee, and I shall serve on the Select Committee on Deregulation, probably as Chairman. Therefore, I have plenty of work to do without being trustee of the fund.

Mr. Howarth: As those with plenty to do always have time to do a little more, I think that we have a nomination from the hon. Member for Burnley. Given his qualification as a previous trustee of two pension funds, he is ideally qualified. We are making progress.

In contrast with the situation in which the Labour party finds itself, apparently having too many Members committed in other places, the Conservative party has 165 hon. Members, the lowest number for many a long year, but, despite my right hon. and hon. Friends' responsibilities in the House as her Majesty's loyal Opposition, we have nominated my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who has a distinguished record of service in government and as

[Mr. Howarth]

Leader of the House and understands how the House works—a volunteer, not a press-ganged man—and my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), who is not in the Chamber today but is also a Conservative appointee, willingly serving.

My right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend have appropriate experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West is the adviser to the British Insurance and Investment Brokers' Association, and so has relevant experience, and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, is a non-executive director of London and Manchester, dealing with pensions.

The Opposition have discharged their responsibility to the House to nominate as trustees those with relevant experience who can bring something to the corporate body of hon. Members who need to ensure that their pension fund is in safe hands.

I do not cast aspersions on Labour Members, but we do not know them.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The hon. Gentleman said that this is a non-partisan issue, without party divisions, but has he not argued that there will be Conservative Members on it with satisfactory credentials? When the matter was debated on Monday, aspersions were clearly cast on the nomination of the Liberal Democrats, who is an hon. Member with wide industrial and commercial experience who is entirely suited to the membership of the body. The trustees represent a variety of ages, politics and experiences who, taken together, form a sound body. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree?

Mr. Howarth: Frankly, that is garbage. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. That is simply not true. The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) was chief economist at Shell. I do not dispute that he has something to offer from outside, but he has no knowledge of the workings of the House. He has six months' experience of being a Member, so he has no breadth of experience of the difficulties that hon. Members face.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Howarth: I shall give way provided that the hon. Lady does not accuse me of prolonging the debate.

Ms Walley: If the hon. Gentleman is so concerned about the proceedings of the House, would it not be better if we could make some progress and get on to the debate on how we run the place?

Mr. Howarth: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. I promised that I would not speak for too long, so I shall begin to wind up my remarks because the next debate is on an important matter.

I hope that my right hon. Friends and I have made the point. We do not wish to attack the external credentials of the Labour nominees, but it is a mistake for the House to appoint as trustees too many hon. Members who do not have the relevant experience of this place. That is the issue about which we feel strongly. We shall have to decide whether to divide the House.

4.49 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I have been in the House longer than anyone who has spoken in the debate, with the exception of the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who has taken a keen interest in this matter for a long time. He implied that previous committees of the great and the good had perhaps not done as good a job as some of those who advocate that more of the great and the good should be trustees might think.

On Monday night, I offered to listen to suggestions from any hon. Member who was concerned about this issue, but only one raised the matter with me. After listening to contributions from Conservative Members, I think that we will have an experienced group of trustees. It will comprise Opposition Members, some new blood and at least one hon. Member with experience of one Parliament. Overall, it will be a pretty balanced group in which we can have confidence.

Conservative Members have not quite decided whether they are or are not attacking the individuals who have been nominated. They have not made their case by arguing that some of the Labour nominees are too inexperienced. By definition, this is not a party political activity. If the trustees include new Members, Members with some experience, Members with great experience, people with knowledge of the pensions industry and GPS with useful experience, we will have a group in which I have more confidence than perhaps I would have had, if we had not had the debate. We have considered the many aspects that the trustees will have to cover and the qualities that they should have.

I have no concerns about the make-up of the trustees. Hon. Members who want to serve are doing us all a service. Instead of their being pilloried, the House should be grateful that they are willing to serve on our behalf.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr. John Butterfill, Dr Vincent Cable, Mr. Barry Gardiner, Mr. John MacGregor, Dr Nick Palmer, Dr Howard Stoate, Ms Gisela Stuart and Paddy Tipping be appointed Managing Trustees of the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund in pursuance of Section 1 of the Parliamentary and other Pensions Act 1987.

HOUSE OF COMMONS MEMBERS' FUND

Ordered,

That Mr. John Butterfill, Dr. Vincent Cable, Mr. Barry Gardiner, Dr. Nick Palmer, Dr. Howard Stoate and Ms Gisela Stuart be appointed Managing Trustees of the House of Commons Members' Fund in pursuance of Section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 1939.—*[Mr. McFall.]*

Modernisation of the House

4.52 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Ann Taylor): I beg to move,

That this House approves the First Report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons: The Legislative Process (HC 190).

I am pleased that we have now come to the debate on this important topic. Many hon. Members are pleased that the Select Committee on Modernisation has produced a report so quickly. Soon after the general election, in the debates on the Gracious Speech and in subsequent debates, hon. Members showed that there is a great desire for modernisation. What struck many of us was that not just new Members are interested in changing our procedures, but many experienced hon. Members who have been in the House for some time want better procedures so that their time can be put to better use.

It becomes obvious to hon. Members who have been in the House for some time that some debates are not as fruitful, productive and enlightening as they could be, although I draw no conclusions from the previous debate. Some hon. Members may feel that that hour could have been better spent, and that one of the lessons to be learned is that if all hon. Members did their homework before they came into the Chamber, the debates would be of a better quality, although that aspect is not yet being considered by the Committee.

At the general election, the Labour party promised to put the issue of the modernisation of the House of Commons on the agenda, and to establish a Select Committee to examine the topic. We are discussing the Committee's first report and its progress to date. I hope that the debate and the responses of hon. Members by letter or through discussions will enable the Committee to set priorities for its future work. We intend to consider the parliamentary year and the parliamentary week, the conduct of debate in the Chamber and the scrutiny of European legislation.

I shall begin by referring to the report and its specific recommendations. I hope that our proposals and the reasons for them are clear from the report, which was agreed unanimously. When the Committee was first established and the names of its members were published, there was some doubt as to whether it could proceed on the basis of unanimity, but we worked extremely well as a Committee. I pay tribute to members of the Committee for their appreciation of the mood for change that has been evident in the House.

To some people, any discussion of the procedures of the House may seem dry and boring. Perhaps that is inevitable. If the changes that the Committee has suggested could be made to work—which could happen only with the good will of all hon. Members—we would make better use of parliamentary time, and the scrutiny of Bills would be more appropriate. The procedure would be more flexible, so that the treatment of each Bill would depend on what was appropriate for that legislation.

The Committee is grateful for the comments of the Chairmen's Panel. We appreciate the fact that it considered the report quickly, and its response has been very positive. The points that it has raised and the items that it wants us to examine in further detail can usefully be discussed. We are grateful for its constructive comments.

The Committee dealt with a range of issues. We discussed the possibility of programming certain Bills to make better use of the time available, and to ensure that the different parts of a Bill are discussed appropriately. We have come up with suggestions for greater flexibility, particularly in Standing Committees. For example, the new clause procedure could be used when discussing every part of the Bill. Instead of discussing all the amendments and then having a clause stand part of the debate at the end, we could, in Committee, have a clause stand part debate at the beginning, and then move on to consider amendments once the Committee had decided to accept the principle of the clause. That would allow members of the Committee to discuss the clause, and amendments to it, more constructively, which would benefit everyone.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): According to paragraph 16 of the Chairmen's Panel report on the Modernisation Committee's proposals concerning the legislative process, the panel's members

"see some difficulty in adapting to this method of proceeding."

We would be wise to consider that with some care. I do not want to raise hopes that we are going to do something until we are certain about it.

Mrs. Taylor: I have discussed the matter with the Chairman of Ways and Means. I understand that the Chairmen's Panel would like an experiment to be carried out—not just in one or two Standing Committees; a more widespread experiment. That would allow the changes to be experienced in different sets of circumstances. Perhaps we were not being adventurous enough for the Chairmen's Panel. There is, however, a constructive point to be made: if we are to conduct experiments, they must be sufficiently extensive for us to learn something from them. I do not think that I am breaking any confidences when I say that, when I spoke to the Chairman of Ways and Means, I undertook to consider that recommendation and to discuss it further, bearing the Panel's views in mind. I thought that those views showed a constructive approach to our suggestions.

Much of what the Modernisation Committee says suggests that we should use the existing procedures of the House in a more imaginative way than we sometimes do. I think that many hon. Members—including, perhaps, some members of the Committee—were struck by the flexibility that already exists in our proceedings. We often do not take advantage of that flexibility, using routine procedures as a matter of course. The diagram at the back of the Committee's report is very illuminating. There is much that we can do to improve the position if there is good will throughout the House. When we want change, we should make that change on an experimental basis. We should not rush to presume that the Committee has uncovered every detail of the change that is required—and, certainly, the Committee did not approach its work in that way. For the Government's part, I submitted a memorandum to the Committee, which has been published. We welcomed the report, and will of course co-operate in trying to ensure that the proposed changes work in practice.

The section on draft Bills, which was in the memorandum, has found general favour. We have also said that we will introduce—this year, I hope—seven draft Bills, and I hope that it will be possible for at least some

[Mrs. Taylor]

of them to be considered by the departmental Select Committees with the aim of improving decision making and giving Back Benchers a more constructive role. I am pleased to say that the Select Committee on Social Security—which is chaired by a Liberal Democrat—has already agreed that, when the draft Bill on pension sharing is ready, it will conduct an investigation, and try to ensure that the Bill's proposals are workable. I believe that, had we adopted a similar approach when, for example, the Child Support Agency was introduced, we would not have our present problems.

Draft Bills can be used to deal with other problems that arise from time to time. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will shortly publish a draft Bill dealing with rapid-draw lotteries, which are causing concern to many people but on which it will take time to legislate. A draft Bill will enable others to see what proposals are ready, and we can legislate when we find a slot. Draft legislation can play a constructive role, and, when it deals with significant issues such as pension sharing, it will benefit everyone if a Select Committee is involved. There is agreement on that now.

It is possible that not all the Committee's recommendations can be tried out this year. It may not be possible to try out enough of them to conduct a proper experiment. For instance, I cannot at this stage mention a suitable Bill for a rollover experiment. Perhaps, over the next few months, an issue will emerge to which the Government will want to respond—or will be under pressure from the Opposition to respond—and legislation will be required, to be dealt with by a Special Standing Committee. On that basis, we might want to recommend such a Bill for rollover; I do not rule that out. The Government, however, will not manufacture such a Bill simply to test the procedure. We should keep an open mind, and use the suggestions in the Committee's report as appropriate.

This is an unusual year. It is the first year of a new Parliament, and the first year of any new Parliament generally involves a heavy legislative programme. That was the case under earlier Conservative Governments, and the legislative programme of a new Government who have been out of office for 18 years is particularly heavy in the first year. It may not be possible to assess the full impact of the proposed changes, because they cannot be assessed against the background of the weight of business in a normal year. I hope, however, that we can test as many of the new proposals as possible, and that most of them—perhaps with minor modifications—will prove useful to the House.

Some of the changes recommended by the Modernisation Committee have already been implemented. Let me give some examples, which may seem minor to those outside the House but have, I think, been helpful to Members of Parliament. One of the first pressures that we experienced came from new Members who were appalled at the congestion in the Lobbies. We examined the problem urgently, and suggested that a third desk should be used. That alleviated—but did not solve—the problem of congestion at voting times. After the Committee made that recommendation, the House implemented it swiftly; we were grateful for that.

The Committee will consider other possible changes in voting procedure in the new Session, and will take evidence about the possibility of electronic voting. It has not been decided to adopt such a system yet. I think that one point on which all members of the Committee are agreed is that, whatever changes are made, voting should take place either in the Chamber or in the Lobbies—in the vicinity of the Chamber, rather than remote from it. The Committee is still considering the matter, however, and is seeking extra evidence.

We also—you, Madam Speaker, are aware of this as much as anyone—made recommendations on changing the Order Paper, and you authorised the introduction of the new Order Paper after the summer recess. The response was much more significant than I had thought it would be—Members seemed really to welcome the change. Members of the press in particular were somewhat puzzled by the fact that they could now understand what was going to happen later in the day.

It may be possible to make even more improvements to the Order Paper and to build on what we have done so far. One or two suggestions have been made and if hon. Members have any other ideas we will, of course, consider them. One that has been mentioned to me is to incorporate into the Order Paper once a week the times and nature of Select Committee sittings when evidence is being taken, so that Members have further warning of what is happening. Sometimes, they do not realise until the morning that such a sitting is taking place and, by that time, they have other commitments.

Another matter that may seem technical and dry, but which is important, is the explanatory memorandum. Some legislation has already gone through the House and new Members in particular may have been somewhat puzzled by some of the information that accompanies a Bill. The so-called explanatory material is often as difficult to comprehend as the Bill. It can often be extremely technical and it does not always give a full picture of exactly what the Bill does. Often it uses the same technical language as the Bill. That problem has caused concern for many years. Committee members shared my concern about that, as did the Parliamentary Counsel Office, which is responsible for the drafting of Bills and of explanatory memorandums.

Ministers have often provided at least notes on clauses. Sometimes, those are informative; sometimes they too simply echo the clauses to Committees. That does not seem to take us much further forward. What is required is one document that sets out in non-technical terms the key points that are needed to grasp what a Bill does and how it will do it. We suggest that there should be changes on the part of Government when a Bill is presented. The First Parliamentary Counsel has been working to provide a new document, which might be called "The Explanatory Notes to a Bill", and would replace the existing explanatory memorandum and notes on clauses. To have such a document published for the assistance of Members would be a significant step forward and, of course, it could be made more widely available—including, I would hope, on the internet.

The only sensible way in which to judge the value of this proposal is to consider examples, so I am going to write to each member of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, setting out some of the detailed proposals, including an example or two of what a new set of explanatory notes could look

like. I shall ensure that those examples are placed in the Library, so that other Members can see them and comment. Then the Committee might wish to discuss what advice it wants to give to the Government in terms of proceeding along those lines. It would be helpful if we informed Members in a better way exactly what the purpose and contents of Bills are.

All those things are not exactly earth shattering. Some people would say that we would not have had any changes had they been so, but they mark real progress and there is certainly much more to do. Some people said a few months ago, "When will you modernise Parliament?", as if modernisation were one event. None of us on the Committee thought of modernisation as one event. It is a process and we have started well on it, but there is much more work to come.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke–on–Trent, North): May I draw to my right hon. Friend's attention how pleased I am with the progress in respect of legislation? That is absolutely crucial, but a further aspect concerns me as well, which I hope the Committee will have an opportunity to move on to because it is important, too. It is how Parliament has proper scrutiny through Select Committees of what the Government are doing. May I bring to her attention the work and recommendations of the Select Committee on Trade and Industry, of which I am a current member and on which I have sat previously? Recommendations in its report relate to the Crown jewels procedure and to whether we should have a procedure for parliamentary investigations instigated by the House or by Select Committees. In certain circumstances, such a parliamentary investigation could perhaps have more resources than Select Committees currently have for particular inquiries. I urge her to consider that issue, too, when we have got through this legislative programme for improving our procedures.

Mrs. Taylor: I know that my hon. Friend has done much work on Select Committees and I value her expertise. I cannot promise that we will recommend the changes that she suggests, but we will certainly come on to the work of Select Committees. All Members at that stage will have an opportunity to feed in their ideas and she will be able to expand on hers at that time.

On the future work of the Select Committee, let me remind Members of the work that we are doing immediately and in the near future. We are doing further work on the feasibility and desirability of electronic voting, and we are considering the way in which the parliamentary year, parliamentary week and parliamentary day are scheduled. We have had a couple of interesting and open discussions, although no conclusions have been drawn. We are going to consider the conduct of debate in the House and the scrutiny of European legislation. All are areas of concern to many Members. We received many representations on them when the Committee was first established.

I should be happy to hear more from Members this evening about what their priorities are, but I know that there are conflicts in the views of different Members from different parts of the country or in different groups. All Members should appreciate that there are no easy solutions to these problems.

Following the Jopling changes, surveys were done and the information that we have already from Members shows us that, in some respects, there is an agreed pattern of what a parliamentary week should be. Most Members believe that Parliament should sit from Monday lunch time to Thursday tea time. Many think that there should be no very late nights, although London Members would define late nights differently from Select Committee members, as would northern Members.

There is concern about the fact that Parliament sits so much when schools are on holiday and it is half term. There are demands for constituency weeks, for early notices of the recess, for no diminution in the power of Back Benchers and for the Government not to use guillotines, yet there is also a requirement for Government to get their legislation through. It is clear that all those objectives are not compatible. Different Members legitimately have different priorities. For some Members, the priority is to be in this Chamber. For others, it is to serve on a Select Committee. Some will specialise in European legislation or regional advocacy and others will want to spend a lot of time representing the interests of their constituents, perhaps at constituency level.

It is impossible to please everyone, but we are trying to devise a system that will allow all 659 Members to undertake their jobs in their individual way—in the way that they think is most appropriate to their constituents. That is the difficulty with which we wrestle. Every hon. Member carries out their job in a different way, according to what they think is appropriate for their constituency. We have to provide a framework to enable them to do that.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): The right hon. Lady was describing the different ways in which Members of Parliament approach their job. Will she accept that, in the circumstances that she has described, it would be impossible to lay out a job description for Members of Parliament? Will she resist the calls that I understand are being made to produce such a document?

Mrs. Taylor: I think that our constituents would be surprised to learn that there is no job description for Members of Parliament. The problem is that one runs into significant difficulties as soon as one attempts to write such a document. That is why I acknowledge that all Members of Parliament do their considerable job in very different ways. The priorities I have expressed, such as the Chamber, Select Committees and constituency work, are all legitimate priorities. I suspect that all hon. Members would, or at least should, acknowledge that they have to cover all those points at some stage during their parliamentary life.

We need a framework to allow Members of Parliament to do their job in the way that they each think fit. At the same time, we have to deliver good government, and that is a tall order. We have to ensure that we satisfy everybody and that everybody can undertake their work as they wish.

From the responses we have had it is easy to see how different the priorities are. Some people ask for more time for Adjournment debates, some are demanding more morning sittings and some object to any morning sittings at all because they want to get on with their constituency work. We have had demands for early evening finishes or for Committees to sit in the evening. We have had objections to such proposals from Members with constituencies in different parts of the country; they take a different view. The Committee will have to take on board all those different views.

[Mrs. Taylor]

The Committee is aware that there is consensus for change, but we also know that there is not yet consensus about what that change should be. It is important that the Committee should formulate ideas in the context of keeping in touch with hon. Members. That is why we will continue to encourage hon. Members to feed in information and to keep in touch with members of the Committee.

We have had many suggestions about the Chamber that I know will interest you, Madam Speaker, and your Deputy Speakers and Chairmen. There have been suggestions that Question Time should be in the morning rather than the afternoon and that the House should rise at 7 o'clock—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] There have been suggestions that the House should never sit on Fridays and that we should use Tuesday and Thursday mornings for Committees of the whole House.

All those suggestions have some logic and my hon. Friends are saying "Hear, hear." to some of them. If we did all of them, we would get no business through at all, especially if we had constituency weeks as well. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) approves of the idea of us getting no business through. He has already proved today that he is not a moderniser so I would expect nothing less from him.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) *indicated assent.*

Mrs. Taylor: I am glad to have that confirmed.

During the next few weeks, we will be discussing the conduct of debates in the House. That is necessary because there have been so many changes in attitude to debate over the years and because some of the normal courtesies of the House seem to have gone out of the window. We saw that yesterday during the introduction of the new Member with some of the most appalling scenes I have seen in the House for some time.

When the new Members first arrived in the House they looked for quick solutions such as suggesting that every speech should be limited to 10 minutes. There have been suggestions that Privy Counsellors should not be given precedence in debate. There have been discussions about wigs, top hats and about referring to Members by name rather than by constituency. We have reached no decisions on those matters and our main concern will be to ensure that the House functions properly and that good use is made of the time of hon. Members.

The Select Committee has made a good start on the process of change, but it is a process. I hope that the House will support the report and assist the Committee in its future work.

5.24 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): As the Leader of the House has pointed out, the report has been agreed unanimously by the Committee and we all welcome that. I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) have been in touch with her to explain that they had engagements which predated their membership of the Committee and that that was why they could not be here today.

The Opposition welcome the Committee's recognition, in examining proposals for change, of the principles laid down by a distinguished predecessor of the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). In his evidence to the Jopling Committee, he said:

"the position of Government must not be undermined and the Government of the day must still be able to get its business;

the Opposition must have adequate opportunity to oppose and its legitimate rights must be sustained;

back benchers must have adequate scope to raise matters of concern to them or their constituents, but a balance has to be struck between unlimited freedom for back benchers and the efficient operating of Parliament as a law-making body."

The Leader of the House has illustrated the difficulty of balancing competing claims. She has given examples of the type of demands that are made of the process of modernisation. The Committee's report reflects the principles laid down by my right hon. Friend.

What will be particularly helpful is the insistence that the various options for change should be tried out on an experimental basis and the view that comments from hon. Members and others will be an important part of any change. It has been interesting to receive comments from new Members and to set those alongside the views of more seasoned members of the Committee and others. I believe that the report is a little optimistic in the way that it thinks we can deal with the red-in-tooth-and-claw nature of political activity in the House. However, the experimental approach adopted will at least demonstrate those areas where easier progress can be made.

The Opposition's view has been guided consistently by the conviction that Parliament—the House of Commons and the other place—is one of the principal and foremost institutions of the British constitution. That constitution is rooted in the notion that Parliament is sovereign and that the laws of our land can be made and repealed only by Acts of that Parliament. It is a matter of regret that the Government, in their ill-thought-out dash for votes in Scotland and Wales, have not so far allowed sufficient time for consideration of the implications for Parliament and for our constitution of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

I believe that the Government's plans for the incorporation of the European convention on human rights into British law call into question the sovereignty of Parliament. In contrast, our attitude to reform has always been that change to one of the principle pillars of our constitution should be evolutionary. So far, thankfully, that has been the Modernisation Committee's approach. We are not opposed to sensible examination of the way in which Parliament works. Indeed, it has been under Conservative Governments that some of the most far-reaching and beneficial constitutional reforms have been introduced—notably, the Jopling reforms on which the Committee has built its work.

Mr. Forth: My right hon. Friend has expressed her support for the report, but does she share my unease about the analysis in paragraph 8? It says:

"The Committee stage of a Bill, which is meant to be the occasion when the details of the legislation are scrutinised, has often tended to be devoted to political partisan debate rather than constructive and systematic scrutiny."

Does my right hon. Friend share my problem with that, which is that that analysis, which is fairly accurate, is based on the experience of the last few Parliaments,

when the Labour party was in opposition? Does she share my regret that we have not had an opportunity to see how the new parliamentary regime works with we Conservatives in opposition, where we might oppose more effectively? Does she therefore share my unease at the proposals emerging from the one-sided analysis?

Mrs. Shephard: As I said, I think that the report is a little optimistic in the way in which it tends to ignore the political nature of activities in the House, which, after all, is one of the points of its existence. However, as we do not intend to be in opposition for very long, my right hon. Friend's anxiety is perhaps ill-founded and needless.

The previous Government produced a balanced package of improvements to parliamentary procedure in response to the Jopling report. They introduced more practical working hours, constituency Fridays, private Members' business on Wednesday mornings, more notice of business and recess dates, more voluntary timetabling of Bills and opportunities for the whole House to debate Select Committee reports.

I was most interested in what the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley) said about Select Committees. This is absolutely in parenthesis, but I, too, have my concerns—having been hauled up before Select Committees in various ministerial guises—about the ways in which some Select Committees go. I shall take careful note of the examples that she has drawn to the attention of the House to see what lessons can be learned when the Modernisation Committee considers Select Committees.

Ms Walley: It is crucial that Select Committees play an important part in what goes on. I believe that the Environment Sub-Committee—a new Select Committee which has been set up since the election—along with the Public Accounts Committee, provided that it has adequate resources, could make important progress.

Mrs. Shephard: As I said, I am very interested in what the hon. Lady says. May I ask the Leader of the House whether we are to consider Select Committees eventually? There will be varied experiences among the Committee's members—hon. Members who have served on Committees, chaired Committees and been grilled by them. The examples quoted by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North are useful. There should be an opportunity to consider things in depth. Although I am not being asked to say all this, I do not think that Select Committees should be asked to respond instantly to the political flavour of the moment. Their work ought to be more on-going, but that has not always been so.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The right hon. Lady asked about the modernisation of Select Committees. We shall, of course, have to decide that in due course. I hope that we will get around to considering Select Committees, but I do not regard it as an immediate priority—not least because I think that most people believe that Select Committees work quite well.

Mrs. Shephard: The right hon. Lady heard what her hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, North said. Of course we have a great deal of work in front of us in any case before we get to Select Committees.

I was going through what the previous Government did in response to the Jopling report. It is worth mentioning that the Chairman of Ways and Means conveyed to the Modernisation Committee his view that the Jopling reforms have resulted in a marked improvement in the way in which business has been conducted in the House in recent years.

The Chairman of Ways and Means pointed out some of the strengths of the present system, such as the appointment of a separate Committee for each Bill, the fact that the process of detailed consideration and confrontation is carried out in public and the tradition of impartial chairmanship. He also pointed out that many of the existing flexibilities were not used fully. That is a really important point: it was flagged up by the Leader of the House and I hope that the Modernisation Committee will return to it. It is ludicrous that we are not using all the opportunities available to us, while trying to find new ones. I know that we shall return to that matter.

Some of the Committee's discussions have illustrated the inherent difficulties of introducing any change at all. The Government of the day—and certainly Ministers of any party—perceive any change as a threat to their ability to get legislation through. Opposition parties in turn are suspicious that any change might prejudice their ability either to criticise or to oppose. Some hon. Members—mostly, although not exclusively, the newer ones—have been at pains to point out the way in which parliamentary procedure is not always perceived flatteringly in the outside world. We have, however, all been able to agree that some practical change is possible. The fact that all changes will be introduced on an experimental basis is welcome.

The Modernisation Committee has sought to increase consultation with Members and the House as a whole before Bills are introduced, to allow time for Members to receive representations from interested parties, and to change procedures and, it must be said, the prevalent culture so that Bills can often be changed after their formal introduction. A macho attitude prevents such change from occurring. Pre-legislative scrutiny—there should be more of it and it should be more systematic—is intended to ease that process and, as the report said, make any change before the whole thing is set in concrete less of a climbdown for Ministers.

The Committee has sought to organise the business of the House so that activity is more evenly spaced throughout the year—although, frankly, that will be hugely difficult, given the competing claims already described by the Leader of the House. The Committee has also sought to maintain the flexibility that is obviously required in any legislative system to cope with an unforeseen situation that has to be legislated for. There have been many such examples in the previous Parliament and other Parliaments, and there will be examples in this one. It clearly makes much sense that there should be more opportunity for pre-legislative scrutiny and consultation.

There should also be as much clarity as possible in proceedings, from the explanatory material published with Bills right through to the Order Paper. I am glad that the changes to the Order Paper have been well received.

There are ideas for more flexibility in the arrangements for Committee sittings and for experimenting with the ways in which a Standing Committee considers clauses in order to encourage more constructive consideration. All the ideas are sensible.

[Mrs. Shephard]

The Opposition have made it clear that we would, however, strongly resist any suggestion that there should be change to what "Erskine May" calls

"the regular practice for Government bills of first class constitutional importance to be committed to a Committee of the whole House".

Our view to that effect is recorded in the Committee's report. We reject suggestions from some that there might somehow be problems with definition or with ordering such business or that the House is incapable of scrutinising such Bills adequately and in detail.

The Leader of the House has chaired the Committee with skill and, on occasion, the patience of at least a minor saint—and that was only with those on her own side. I name no names. We on the Opposition Benches accept the report, while putting down a marker about our reservations on the treatment of constitutional Bills. Clearly, the report is one thing and what the Government intend to do about it is another. The Leader of the House gave some indications in her opening speech of the Government's ideas.

The Chairmen's Panel has expressed its view on the report's implications for the Chairman's role. We must take great notice of that. The work that our Chairmen do as impartial arbiters in Committees and elsewhere in the House is of inestimable importance. We need to take very seriously the points that they make.

I must give notice that we shall scrutinise the Standing Orders carefully when they are eventually placed before the House, in the interests both of the official Opposition and of the House. In particular, we shall examine the proposals for changes in timetabling business to see whether what is proposed will achieve a more consensual approach to a contentious and potent political issue or whether we are merely considering more user-friendly terminology.

One way of achieving the genuine consensus described in the report might be for timetabling motions to be required to be submitted in the name not only of the Leader of the House but of the shadow Leader of the House and the leaders of other Opposition parties. There will be time to discuss all that. Perhaps the Leader of the House might like to consider it.

Mention has been made of changes in attitude towards debate in the House. As we are talking about matters of great importance to the House, I must express some regret at the reputation that, sadly, the Government have earned already for a contempt for Parliament and all its works. I must make my feelings clear, although I will be brief. It is a matter of regret that Prime Minister's questions take place only once a week. It is a matter of regret that the announcement of the operational independence of the Bank of England was made not by a statement to the House but by a press conference. It is a matter of regret that we had an announcement of the Government's policy on the European single currency, again not by a statement but by telephone calls by the Chancellor's press secretary. Those calls caused enormous fluctuations on the equity markets, affecting the value of the future pensions of millions of people. Other unfortunate blips have occurred when, for example, the Minister of Transport did not turn up for an Adjournment debate at all.

Members of Parliament have not been elected to be made over—a process to which the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) referred this afternoon—or to be on message, or to stay submissively silent until paged to speak. That is not what their constituents expect and is not what parliamentary democracy is about. Sensible, evolutionary reform can strengthen our parliamentary democracy: we support it. Contempt for Parliament and its conventions weakens our democracy and our country: we will not allow that to happen.

5.40 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): It is clear that my right hon. Friend intends to be a reforming Leader of the House, following in the footsteps of Dick Crossman and Norman St. John-Stevas. The best time to undertake reform is in the early years of a Parliament and I am pleased that she is doing so.

I wish to make one point about our practice of calling hon. Members by their constituencies rather than by their names. I have always been proud to be the Member of Parliament for Ashton-under-Lyne. It is my constituency and I am here not because I am myself, but because I represent the people of my constituency. It would be a retrograde step if we were to abandon that practice.

The House is now a more full-time House than it has been in the past. One example is that, when I arrive in the morning, at 9 o'clock or sometimes earlier, many more hon. Members are around. Incidentally, the Vote Office is closed until 9.30 am, and we should change that so that it is open earlier for Members' convenience.

The main burden of today's debate is the scrutiny of legislation. We must remember that Standing Committees are really ad hoc committees and their members do not necessarily have any relevant expertise. They are brought together to scrutinise some legislation without necessarily having much of a background in the subject. Of course, some members will have some background knowledge, but the advantage of the involvement of a Select Committee is that its members do have a background in the subject.

The big problem with the way in which Standing Committees currently operate is that it involves the silent being hectored by the voluble. Members of the Standing Committee from the governing party do nothing, although they may be very able and well equipped to contribute. It is a major scandal that our legislation on important issues is dealt with in that way, but that has happened because the Opposition's principal weapon is the power of delay. The best example of the use of that power that I can recall was by Iain Macleod in 1967, when we introduced a Standing Committee to scrutinise the Finance Bill. Before that, Finance Bills were always taken on the Floor of the House. The then Leader of the House, Dick Crossman, suggested that the Finance Bill be taken in Committee, but that was wildly resented by the Opposition. Iain Macleod, the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, spent one and half days in Committee Room 10 talking about the temperature of the Room. That was very effective, because it brought about the realisation that the Opposition had rights. As a result, a sensible and effective compromise was reached, whereby the Opposition could choose matters for debate on the Floor of the House and other matters could be taken in Committee.

The problem now is that the Opposition's power of delay has been eroded, through the increased use of the guillotine. The Whips have also tended to use their power

to ensure that dissentient voices are not heard so frequently in Standing Committees. As a result, Standing Committees no longer resemble the bodies that existed in the past. I well recall the Rooker-Wise amendment, because I was the Financial Secretary to the Treasury at the time. The two Members of Parliament after whom the amendment was named could not be shut up, and when I heard that they were to be members of the Standing Committee I went straight to the Chief Whip and said that that would cost us £500 million. The actual cost was £1 billion, but those two hon. Members were right. However, that situation is not likely to happen often.

Another problem is that senior Ministers do not attend Standing Committees as they used to in the past. The Chancellor of the Exchequer used to handle the Finance Bill. Now it is not even the second Minister who attends, but the third Minister. If a senior Minister is present and has to go through the night, he or she tends to be more convinced by the Opposition's arguments. Now, the third Minister may complain about being kept all night, but the Secretary of State in charge gets up in the morning and waves the objections aside. That is understandable, because he or she wants the legislation to go through.

I have come to the conclusion, much to the disgust of many of my right hon. Friends, that the hopes of compromises in Committee have had their day. The Opposition can no longer use the power of delay in the same way, so we should now ensure that legislation is sensibly examined. On several occasions, legislation has fallen seriously below an acceptable standard, and that has happened when a Government have been sure that their actions were right and the Opposition—having only a truncated power of delay—fail to make any changes to it.

As a result, I now believe that timetabling is essential. Timetabling can be to the advantage of the Opposition, as well as the Government, because there must be a trade-off. The Government get their business through and the Opposition get time. That was the obvious trade-off in the past. In the past, the system was informal, but we must make it a little more formal, because the Opposition have the right to put their view and to be heard. I believe that timetabling will be the crucial issue affecting legislation. The most important date in the timetable is that for the Report stage, because a timetable is not so necessary after that.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is right to say that we need the confidence to undertake experiments. Not every aspect of the modernisation process will be right first time, but if we allow for some variation we can find ways to make more permanent changes. That is the way to proceed.

I wish to deal with one or two particular aspects of the very useful Select Committee report. Paragraph 37 talks about Acts being written in clear language, and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House referred rightly to explanatory notes. The net could be more widely used, but a major problem is how the notes will be looked at by lawyers and others implementing the Acts and considering the intentions of Parliament.

I have particular personal experience of that because, 20-odd years ago, I introduced the benefits-in-kind legislation, under which people were to be charged income tax on the benefits that they received during their work. We went right through several nights running and I—with a small team in those days—tried to explain why the measure was essential. To my surprise, many years later a procedure was introduced whereby what I said became a part of the intentions of the Government and was used to interpret the Act. I had to look at what I had said at 3 o'clock in the morning in the hope that it made sense. Luckily, it did. I am not sure how fortuitous that was.

Clearly, Ministers replying now try—as they should—to expound the principles behind an amendment or other measure, but they should try also to achieve some compromise wherever possible. If they have to bear it in mind that what they say will be interpreted in this way as part of the Act, they will be more constrained. I am uneasy about the fact that the explanatory notes—which are not intended to be a part of the Act—could be shown to give an understanding of what was behind Parliament's intentions. This was never considered 20 years ago, but is now part of the fabric of our legal system.

Paragraph 97 of the Modernisation Committee's report suggests that the Chairman could be given new powers to limit the length of speeches. Clearly, that would apply only when a filibuster was under way. In my experience of Standing Committees, that is much of the time. A greater problem is that, in a Committee, one can speak more than once. That is justifiable, because the point of a Committee is that, after listening to colleagues and to Opposition Members, one may find something that, perhaps, one had not thought of before. How will the Chairman be certain that a filibuster is taking place? Our colleagues are ingenious; they do not read out the telephone directory, as they know that the Chairman would not allow it.

The report referred to Select Committees meeting during the recess, and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House referred to the importance of Select Committees. Select Committees have met during the recess—one of the great things we saw was the enthusiasm for Select Committees, which I wholly admire. We need to improve their work. When I gave evidence to the Nolan committee, I found that, when I arrived there at 9 o'clock in the morning, the minutes of the previous day's meeting were available. When we have a Select Committee, we receive the minutes three weeks later. I know that special arrangements can be made to have them within 24 hours, but even that is not good enough. I spoke to Lord Nolan and those involved in his committee to see how they achieved that. I shall visit my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to discuss this—I do not expect an answer now.

What happens in Select Committees is important—frequently more important than occasions on the Floor of the House—and we need to get their proceedings involved in the parliamentary process. Hon. Members must come here with evidence from Committees and integrate it into a consideration of the political problems of the day. Many members of a Select Committee—Chairmen included—are asked to comment on the previous day's proceedings. They must be careful because, although they have privilege in the Committee, they do not when they appear on radio or television or are reported in the newspapers. They may not be sure exactly what was said, unless they have the minutes.

The reports could be part of the general structure of the parliamentary day, rather than the cold porridge that so many of them are now. Some of the most important

[Mr. Robert Sheldon]

evidence is not read. Who will read it three weeks' later—unless one has a particular interest? If yesterday's evidence were available, people would queue up to read it.

We must look at ways of monitoring and following up the reports of Select Committees. I know that we have three days of debates—I welcome that—but a proper follow-up is just as important. Was the Committee right in coming to a conclusion? Only time can tell. If we want to see what time has told, we must see what has happened in the meantime. The Public Accounts Commission has a superb system, involving the National Audit Office, to deal with 50 reports every year. If the Government agree with the Committee's conclusions, the NAO checks that they have implemented what they said they would. If they disagree, we see next year whether the Committee was right, or the Government.

Ms Walley: Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if the Environmental Audit Committee had those facilities, that would make an enormous difference to the role which it plays in seeing whether the Government are making progress?

Mr. Sheldon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

I hope that the Liaison Committee will act as a clearing house for some of the new ideas. The Treasury Select Committee is undertaking what may be called "confirmatory hearings", and those will be useful in examining the Committee's role in some matters. I shall consult my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to discuss some possibilities. Clearly, she intends to be a reforming Leader of the House. I welcome her appointment and her actions here.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: I will call the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) next. May I just say that many right hon. and hon. Members are interested in taking part in the debate? Unless those speaking discipline themselves, all Members will not be called. I would not dream of inhibiting the right hon. Member for South Norfolk.

5.58 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): I shall try to be as concise as possible, Madam Speaker. I speak as a supporter of appropriate modernisation, as I hope I demonstrated when I was Leader of the House—not least in setting up the Jopling Committee. My only regret about that is that there was insufficient time between the Committee's report and the 1992 general election to enable me to implement its recommendations.

I take the point of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) that it is sometimes easier to get changes through in the earlier part of a Parliament than the latter part. I was pleased that my long-standing friend and ex-colleague Tony Newton, as Leader of the House, was able to make the reforms, with great co-operation from the present Leader of the House.

I wish to make a few general points before I deal with one or two specific proposals. First, I want to refer to the importance of carrying the House on any changes. This is partly a cultural point and partly a practical point.

Paragraph 17 of the report says:

"Another major factor in the largely inflexible approach to legislation adopted hitherto is essentially that of the culture of the House."

I agree with the point about culture, but I do not think that we have been inflexible: many changes have been made and the report builds on them. The paragraph is absolutely right when it says that

"there must be a will in all parts of the House to achieve cooperation wherever it is possible."

I am glad that the Leader of the House acknowledged that when she spoke about good will on all sides.

The will to co-operate was in my mind when I set up the Jopling Committee and it is why I sought to have hon. Members of all parties and of different ages and experience on it. Many people then thought—as the Leader of the House said was thought about the present Committee—that it would not be possible to reach agreement in that Committee, but it was, and that was of huge benefit in getting the changes through.

When I was an Opposition Whip, then a Government Whip, then a Minister in various Departments, before becoming Leader of the House, I was frequently struck by the fact that the procedures of the House are such that a determined minority—often a very small one—can hold up processes and make change almost impossible. Many who were then Opposition Members were expert at that, and one had to take that into account when making changes.

I underline the importance of what my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) said when she stressed the importance of good will, especially among Government Back Benchers, and of the Government's approach to such matters in the House.

I was very disappointed when I heard a Labour Member say, I think, "Now you've spoilt it" while my right hon. Friend was speaking. That comment showed a potentially dangerous misunderstanding of the point that she was making. The hon. Gentleman who said it should be aware of that. There are all sorts of legitimate opportunities to hold matters up, sometimes simply to express the irritation of Members of Parliament who feel that they are being bypassed or that their role is being diminished.

Some of the abruptness and impatience that we have witnessed from the Government, supported by their Back Benchers, should not occur, because, if we are to get the changes through, as we all want, the Government must understand the sensitivities. If there is a feeling that Parliament is being bypassed or ignored or that its role is being diminished by the Government, it is less easy to put into effect the practical, commonsense changes that we think will benefit the House. The Government should be willing to put up with the odd filibuster, because there may be a good reason for it.

Paragraph 7 of the report refers to

"a distinct culture prevalent throughout Whitehall that the standing and reputation of Ministers have been dependent on their Bills getting through largely unchanged."

That may be true to some extent, but civil servants also feel that their reputation depends on resisting every amendment, even purely technical ones, to a Bill that they have been involved in drafting. As a Minister in charge of Bills I noticed that "Resist" was written above almost every amendment, even if the point was technical.

If Parliament is to play its proper role in scrutinising legislation, Ministers must be willing to overrule their civil servants, who in turn should not feel that every bit of a Bill that they have drafted is inviolable. Sometimes a Bill comes back from another place with about 500 amendments; how much better it would be if they were made earlier.

I agree with all the criteria set out in paragraph 14, although some are more important than others. I want particularly to stress that

"All parts of a Bill must be properly considered".

That will lead me on later to a point or two about timetabling.

Paragraph 14(d) caught my eye. It says:

"The time and expertise of Members must be used to better effect."

I was glad that the report recognised Members' expertise. That brings me to a wider point, which is perhaps more relevant to the Nolan committee. I have always been a strong advocate of the House being composed of people with outside expertise, not derived only from their constituents, that they can bring to the workings of the House, especially in legislation. That is why I have always strongly advocated Members continuing to have outside interests. The report acknowledges that their expertise can be relevant on Bills and in other ways.

I strongly agree with the report's approach on flexibility and its recognition that not all Bills are the same, that some may be treated differently from others, and that we can experiment. One or two of the proposals will probably die a death in due course, but I am perfectly happy for us to experiment with them to find out whether they have a contribution to make.

The Government must recognise that several of the recommendations have a considerable time implication. If the Government are to implement them thoroughly, more parliamentary time will have to be given to Bills and there will have to be less legislation. That applies in particular to some of the suggestions in relation to First Reading.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The right hon. Gentleman says that if we give more time to certain Bills we will have to extend the overall time and have less legislation. Does he agree that in the strict routine that we have for legislation we do not always need to give matters as much time as we do? We are very good at wasting time in the House. The fact that we want to extend time in one area does not mean that it could not be saved in other areas.

If we had more draft Bills and early legislation and got the legislation nearer to how it should be at that stage—I believe that the right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) agreed with that—it might go through more quickly. We need to be flexible and do what is most appropriate for each specific Bill.

Mr. MacGregor: One of my hobbies is mind reading, and as I made my last remark I could almost read the right hon. Lady's mind. I knew what she was thinking and I recognise her point, which is why I was treading fairly carefully. She is right in some respects, but I suspect that, in practice, when there is draft legislation followed by the normal processes, those processes may not necessarily be all that much shorter. The great merit will be that the House will pass more considered legislation. I hope that that will lead to our not having to revisit the legislation.

One of our defects—I have been guilty of it myself as Leader of the House—is that we spend so little time considering the revisions by the House of Lords. It is a bit of a scandal that we sometimes make a large number of Lords amendments with hardly any consideration. Many of the amendments are technical, granted, but not all. We agree that the way in which both Houses consider legislation may become lengthier, but will be better.

I am not entirely enamoured of one or two of the specific proposals. I am not sure that they will be a permanent feature. I strongly agree with the drift of the report that permanent legislative Committees are not really the answer, for all the reasons set out in the report. I have some doubts whether the departmental Select Committee is the right place to consider legislation in draft because the membership is already decided for reasons other than the specific piece of legislation.

It may be better to have an ad hoc Select Committee, as the report recommends, because it will be possible to appoint people with specific expertise—in pensions, for example, as the Leader of the House said. The ad hoc Select Committee is probably the right way to take this forward, and I would like some experiments on that. I am doubtful about several of the First Reading Committee proposals, but let us see how they work.

I particularly favour two proposals: the ad hoc Select Committee, on which I do not intend to elaborate further, and the Special Standing Committee. As a very junior Minister—Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Industry—I took through what I believe to have been the first Bill with a Special Standing Committee procedure attached to it. It concerned international exploitation of mineral resources, in particular manganese nodules, in the sea. It was a fairly technical Bill but interesting for me as a Minister and, I am sure, for all the Back Benchers. It was a worthwhile experience, and I am rather sad that we have not used the procedure more.

The Bill required many representations from big international companies and from the many scientists who were directly affected by it. The Special Standing Committee procedure, whereby Ministers and Back Benchers are able to question witnesses, meant that we all learned a great deal. I think that I learned more from that process than from the departmental briefing. We got agreement on some of the issues and therefore did not have to deal with them in the Bill's later stages.

Sir Peter Emery: May I point out to my right hon. Friend that the recommendations for a Special Standing Committee procedure were made by the Procedure Committee in 1988–89 but seldom, if ever, carried out by the Government of which he was a member?

Mr. MacGregor: I said that sometimes I plead guilty. The Bill that I took through had an earlier form of Special Standing Committee procedure because it was in the early 1980s, before that recommendation. The principle and the benefits were the same.

I strongly agree with the report's sensible suggestions in paragraph 44 on greater flexibility on Special Standing Committee procedures. In the past, it has always been thought that Special Standing Committees are of greater relevance to non-political or highly technical Bills. They are relevant in those cases, but there will be politically contentious Bills that are not of the type to which we have

[Mr. MacGregor]

previously applied the procedure but in respect of which there is much expert outside interest. The ability to probe witnesses in front of the Committee greatly adds to the strength of the process. I hope that it will be regarded as a measure not only for technical Bills but for others: some pensions Bills are an obvious example.

I concur with the widely expressed criticisms of the methods that we have used in Standing Committees. I do not need to rehearse the arguments because we are all familiar with them. We know how we got into situations where large parts of Bills were not considered and why they had to be guillotined and so forth. I believe—I said this when I was Leader of the House, although I know that it is not accepted by all right hon. and hon. Members—that timetabling has to be the right way to ensure that all parts of Bills are properly considered. That was the target that the Modernisation Committee set itself.

The result of the Jopling report was a voluntary agreement on timetabling in the previous Parliament, which I think worked well. It was greatly to the benefit of the House and, above all, to proper scrutiny of Bills. I am not sure that the more detailed and formal format now proposed is necessary, but I am again prepared to see how it works. I recognise that there may be contentious Bills where such a format is necessary to get agreement. In most cases, I hope that it can be done through the usual channels as in the previous Parliament. The matter lies at the heart of proper scrutiny of Bills and it is therefore important, whether done formally or informally, that it is carried through.

On the carry-over of Bills and paragraph 102 of the report, I think that it is right to have the flexibility that applies to private and hybrid Bills, not least because it is one way of handling the too frequent problem where many amendments come back from the House of Lords and we rush them through in the last three or four days. No one could argue that that is satisfactory. The problem arises because, inevitably, some Bills will be introduced later in the Session; they cannot all be done earlier. A genuine pressure on time causes that. Used sensibly, this proposal is a way of ensuring better scrutiny at that stage. That is why I have one point of doubt about another part of the report.

The report suggests that the new approach should apply if there is

"identification by the Government as early as possible of any Bill it wished to be subject to a carry-over procedure",

and

"that the procedure should only be used for Bills which are either to be subject to select committee type scrutiny or are introduced after a certain period in the session".

That is unnecessarily restrictive.

There may be occasions when a major Bill that is introduced early in the Session, but is not identified as one to which the procedure should apply undergoes many changes—especially in the other place. It may be better to allow a limited amount of carry-over than do what we have done in the past—give no attention to what the other place has done and have no opportunity to discuss the changes that it has made. I am in favour of the principle, but I hope that there will be flexibility.

I hope that my remarks show that I applaud the Committee's work. The fact that it is unanimous is highly desirable. Above all, it will need good will, not least on the Government's side, to ensure that the new reforms work.

6.16 pm

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on the Modernisation Committee's report. The Prime Minister has rightly said, both before and since the general election, that if we are to improve democracy we must address the problems of democracy in the way the House functions. That is what the Modernisation Committee is addressing. There is much that we will have to do.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) made several points. I welcome his comments on rollover; if anything, the report is too restrictive. I recognise, however, which it is an important change of principle. It may be something that we must test before gradually moving further in that direction.

I have said several times that people elect a Parliament for five years, not one. The Government could have a much more balanced programme than having all Second Readings at one time of year, then having Committees before sending Bills to the other place, bringing them back here and causing an unnecessary crush.

When we debated the railway privatisation legislation, the other place would carry amendments and send them to us. We did not know what they had carried, and we were asked to vote on amendments that had not even been printed. That was nonsense. I have questioned—some might consider this heretical—whether we need a Queen's Speech every year. Why not just have one at the start of Parliament? If we must have annual speeches, why not announce that the Government will introduce legislation, but continue with other legislation? I see no reason for not moving in that direction.

Hon. Members have commented on Select Committees. I served for a number of years on the Environment Committee under the chairmanship of Sir Hugh Rossi. Some 15 years ago, we produced a tremendous number of reports on environmental issues such as acid rain, nuclear waste and river pollution. People condemned them as outrageous, but most of them were subsequently accepted and they are now considered the norm.

Select Committees do a tremendous amount of good work, but the resources available to them for expert advice are a little too tight. I do not say that we should go mad, but I hope that we shall ensure that Select Committees are adequately resourced to do their job. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) rightly said, we must ensure that all Select Committee reports have an opportunity to be debated and are monitored at a future date to see what effect they have had.

We sometimes allow people outside this place to judge Parliament by what is done in the Chamber, whereas much important work is done in Committee. The other day, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said that some 467 hon. Members were serving on various Committees at that point, yet most people, even if they read the newspapers, do not know what those Committees do. We must therefore ensure that people are better informed.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House referred to voting. The third voting desk has certainly helped. She said that it had alleviated the problem; it has not solved the problem, however, and we should not pretend that it has. I dread the day when the Conservatives vote with Labour and opposition comes only from the Liberal Democrats—the crush would be unbearable.

We should try to maintain the principle that votes are taken in person in the Chamber or close to it. We should not introduce desktop voting in various parts of the House. While it would be wrong to jump to conclusions, the Committee should look further into all these issues.

My right hon. Friend also referred to European legislation. The last Procedure Committee produced a unanimous report on European legislation which I hope will be used as a base for the Modernisation Committee's work. The Committee did a lot of the spade work, so some repetition could be avoided if its report is taken as a starting point.

There are differing views on the parliamentary day and year. Some want to start work on a Monday morning, but others who live a long distance away would then have to travel to London on a Sunday, which would be detrimental. The 2.30 pm start on Mondays, whatever happens on other days, should remain. Some people believe that finishing at 7 o'clock on Thursdays would enable everybody to get away to do constituency work on Fridays. That is nonsense for those who depend on public transport. They would have to use their own cars if they wanted to return to their constituencies on a Thursday night and use constituency Fridays fully. When I have a constituency Friday, I try to put four or five appointments in my diary to use the day fully, but I cannot rely on public transport and have to use my own car in both directions.

Another difficulty, which arose just after the general election, is where hon. Members can speak from in this Chamber. It is ridiculous that so few seats are available when there are other seats in the Chamber where additional microphones could be installed to enable more hon. Members to exercise their right to speak.

Some might say that the Chamber is rarely full, but it is wrong that a percentage of hon. Members should be excluded from their democratic right to speak in Parliament. A couple of weeks ago, I came into the Chamber for Prime Minister's Question Time half an hour beforehand and found the Labour Benches already full. That barred me from the opportunity to speak, had I wanted to do so. We should extend the available speaking places to other parts of the Chamber.

We should also consider 10-minute time limits for most speeches and review the rules on interventions. It must be recognised that interventions should be relevant and brief. The character and debating style of the House are spoilt by people delivering 10-minute, sterile speeches, with no to and fro in the debate. We must maintain some flexibility.

The report is not one which the Government can accept, because it is not just for the Government. Some aspects are, because they initiate the legislation, but the Opposition have responsibilities too, if we are to proceed positively. Indeed, every Member of Parliament has a responsibility to make our procedures work if we are to proceed as the report suggests. If we want better government, better legislation, better debate, and an Opposition able to look at different parts of Bills properly, we need to proceed as the report suggests.

I remember my first full Bill in the House. It was the Transport Bill of 1985, on which I spoke for four hours in Committee without adding one iota to the debate. Many important clauses were not debated as a result.

This proposal is sensible for good government and good legislation and it gives the Opposition, whichever party they happen to be, a fair opportunity.

6.25 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). He serves with me on the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and was an astute Member of my Procedure Committee for many years in the previous Parliaments. He would support my claim that nobody has been a greater procedural reformer in the House than I have tried to be over the 14 years that I chaired the Procedure Committee.

I remember discussing with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) the need to set up a Jopling-type Committee—for example, with a number of Privy Counsellors, and the chairman of the parliamentary Labour party—rather than leave everything with the Procedure Committee. That was so that greater weight could be put into the recommendations and so that the Committee had the strength to command the approval of the vast majority of the House.

It has been pointed out that it takes very little to stop procedural reform. I remind new Members that Jopling was delayed for two years because of the conservatism of one particular Member of Parliament. At that time, he sat on the Opposition Front Bench next to the Gangway. Don Dixon was Deputy Chief Whip of the Labour party. Only when we could swing him round could we proceed with Jopling. We therefore need reports that can be carried with the vast majority of opinion in the affirmative.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I remind the House that Mr. Don Dixon, now the noble Lord Dixon, was not swung round at all. He is still very much averse to the Jopling proposals. I remind the House that the need for Jopling arose because the Government left the reports issued so regularly and consistently by the Procedure Committee, of which I was also a member, on the shelf gathering dust.

Sir Peter Emery: I do not disagree with anything that the hon. Gentleman says. It only goes to show that proposals need Government support, whichever Government are in power, and I shall fight this Government as I fought my own to advance the procedures.

I should like to pose a few questions—I do not know who is to wind up. I am delighted that the report expresses a unanimous view that we must find procedures to ensure that all parts of a Bill are debated in Committee before it comes back to the House. It was a crying disgrace that legislation used to come back on Report when perhaps only a third—or sometimes a quarter—of the Bill had been considered in Committee. That is not the way in which the Opposition should perform, and I would not want the Conservative party in opposition to perform in

[Sir Peter Emery]

that manner. We are here to try to make the best possible legislation, and that must mean that all sections of a Bill must be considered in Committee.

I am sure that, like me, the whole House welcomes the Committee's suggestions on pre-legislative scrutiny. Such scrutiny would make legislation much better, so when will we start? When will one or two Bills that the Government have in train be considered by a pre-legislative Committee, so that we can carry forward the suggestions made in paragraphs 19 and 20 of the report?

I come now to paragraph 43. I am delighted that, as I pointed out in my intervention on the right hon. Member for South Norfolk—

Mr. MacGregor: I thought I was your friend.

Sir Peter Emery: I am sorry—the right hon. Member is a close friend, if I may say so without being misinterpreted. The Special Standing Committee procedure has been in the Standing Orders for long enough and the report urges that it should be used more often. I am sorry to say that we have not yet seen it used by the Government.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: Oh, come on.

Sir Peter Emery: I know that it is early days yet, but a lot of legislation is coming through now and I hope to receive an assurance that some of it will go to a Special Standing Committee.

Paragraphs 83 and 95 deal with Committee procedure and Committees on European and secondary legislation. Way back in June, we were told that the Government would consider and report on that subject, but we have seen nothing yet. May we put a rocket under the Government so that they express their view and allow that aspect of the report to be carried forward?

I hope that the very sensible suggestion of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk that Lords amendments could be sent back to the original Committee for consideration, so that they do not have to be galloped through on the Floor of the House, is accepted. Let us make certain that that comes about.

I have one slight worry. I was willing to go along with the proposal on enabling Bills to be carried over from one Session to the next, but it is imperative that, by agreeing to that, the Opposition do not let the Government off the hook and so allow the Government to play legislation any way they please for however long they want. Such practice is to the detriment both of good legislation and of the Opposition. I understand that if a Bill is introduced late in a Session, there might be an argument for carrying it over, but we must look carefully at such a recommendation, to ensure that it does not emasculate the power of the Opposition.

I now refer to points relating to the Chairmen's Panel. In common with the hon. Member for Burnley, other hon. Members might welcome powers being given to Chairmen to limit the length of speeches in Committees. It is interesting that the Chairmen's Panel went further than the Select Committee and suggested that

"the power to limit the length of speeches should apply to Ministers and other frontbench spokesmen"

and not only to Back Benchers. That idea from the Chairmen's Panel is revolutionary, but it is nevertheless interesting and we should bear it in mind.

Mr. MacGregor: I understand the reasons behind that suggestion, but I have always felt that the difficulty facing Ministers is that so many hon. Members want to intervene and probe the Minister on the legislation or whatever is being discussed that their speeches are inevitably lengthened. Will my right hon. Friend bear that in mind?

Sir Peter Emery: I entirely agree with my close and right hon. Friend. However, like the hon. Member for Burnley, I believe that if a time limit is applied, additional time should be allowed when interventions use up part of the allotted time.

We suggested that the Opposition should have access to advisers in Committees, but the Chairmen's Panel has said that that might be complicated and difficult. The Select Committee should look again at that suggestion—the idea behind it is correct, but I understand the Chairmen's point.

It is not my job, as a member of the Select Committee, to put forward new ideas, but I have one that has been a hobby-horse for some time. We have a large number of Select Committees whose members work immensely hard. The Leader of the House tells me that nearly 470 hon. Members sit on such Committees, but how many of their reports are debated on the Floor of the House? If we are lucky, we get about six debates on departmental Select Committee reports scattered throughout the Session, through what used to be called Supply day procedure, although we are now hoping to use some of the Wednesday morning slots. Have we not reached the point where we should set up a "Select Committee Grand Committee" in which every Select Committee report could be debated—a Grand Committee with perhaps 50 members with voting rights and every hon. Member having the right to attend and speak? Every recommendation or report from a Select Committee would go to that Grand Committee, thereby ensuring that the work of the few could be properly debated and considered on behalf of the whole House.

That is all I want to say for now. I hope that it will do nothing to detract from her popularity on the Government Benches, but I congratulate the Leader of the House on having conducted the chairmanship of the Modernisation Committee with charm, elegance and a great deal of efficiency. I am most grateful to her.

6.38 pm

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): I am aware that I have already spoken on several occasions during this Parliament; on at least one of those occasions I spoke at considerable length. I want to assure the House that those speeches were not exercises in self-indulgence: I spoke because I needed to and I spoke at length because I needed to cover the subject. On this occasion, once again, I shall speak not because I want to be in the Chamber but because I have a job to do. I must explain that I am speaking as a member of the Chairmen's Panel. I have consulted collectively with my colleagues—and individually, in and out of formal session—and it would be remiss of me if I did not draw attention to some of the points that cause us concern as Chairmen.

I remind the House that members of the Chairmen's Panel commit themselves to sitting—as you do, Mr. Deputy Speaker—throughout the proceedings of a Committee, unable to walk in or out of the Committee Room as they might wish. They must stay there whether they like it or not. They must stay awake and alert. They must exercise good humour, patience and diligence. They must do all that with the good grace that you, your colleagues and Madam Speaker exercise in the Chamber—not an inconsiderable responsibility.

Chairmen do so because they believe in the parliamentary process, not because they are committed to a party political alliance or line—they save that for other occasions. When they sit in the Chair, they exercise a stark level of clinical impartiality. I believe that, for the effort that they put in, they deserve the greatest attention. I pray for that attention now.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) would berate me if I did not draw attention to the following points. We concern ourselves with the interests of the individual Back Bencher and the protection of those interests. There is a fear that concentration on the acceleration of business through the House and through its processes might to some extent damage and debilitate the interests of the individual Member when acting in an individual role.

Let me take an example. In paragraph 8 of our report, we plead for a Front-Bench spokesperson, when operating in Committee, to bear in mind the interests and views of the Members sitting behind him or her on the same side of the Committee. An unfortunate example of what can happen when that does not occur, which comes readily to mind, is what happened during the passage of the Bill that became the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988, when we were discussing changes in firearms legislation as a direct result of the tragedy that occurred at Hungerford.

I was acting as Opposition Whip. Both sides of the Committee were split on the requirements of the legislation as laid down, and the Government probably had more of their Committee members opposing the proposals than they had supporting them. I believe that it was the first time in history that the Government lost their sittings motion at the first sitting, because there was such diversity of opinion.

If such a situation were repeated, one would need an assurance that the Front-Bench spokesmen would be prepared to heed—not necessarily accommodate in full agreement, but accommodate with some kind of presentational skills—views that were at variance with those expressed by the Government or with the Front-Bench policy statement. That would certainly apply if a time limit were to be imposed.

I take on board the comments made by the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) regarding time limits. We suggested that a similar limitation be placed on Ministers, because otherwise a Minister can take up almost the whole session. As my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) said, he spoke for four hours in Committee simply to take up time. Ministers can take four hours, whether or not they want to take up time. I believe that the record in Committee is 11 hours 25 minutes, during consideration of the Telecommunications Bill.

I believe, as do some of my colleagues, that if time limits are to be imposed on a Back-Bench Member, they should be imposed on the Minister—bearing in mind the fact that the Minister is able to speak more than once on any question. Indeed, one hopes that a similar privilege will be extended to Back-Bench Members, because points of clarification or points of explanation can come up in a debate. One cannot get up with a pat speech and give it and be sure that one has said everything, because one has not heard the response that will ensue in the flexible debate for which my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley pleaded.

One of the virtues of the House is the give and take of debate. Parliaments throughout the world envy our ability to debate across the Chamber—to give way and come back at one another and to create a flowing argument. If we are to conduct the line-by-line scrutiny that the Committee stage demands, we must foster and protect such flexibility.

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I agree entirely with what the hon. Gentleman says about the importance of give and take in debate through interventions, but does he agree that introducing a time limit instantly kills debate? With a time limit of 10 minutes, which we sometimes have in the House, the Member who is speaking knows that he cannot afford to take interventions, because they would occupy too much of his time and might prevent him from making an important point. If we have time limits, we shall not have interventions and we shall not have the type of debate that the hon. Gentleman rightly wants. That is a serious problem.

Mr. Cook: Indeed it is. I have been a victim of that situation many times. If I were to express a personal view, which I will now, I would say that I do not believe in limitation of time. If one is to express a considered view, one must be given the time to express it clearly and understandably. Sadly, I am trying to represent the views of the Chairmen's Panel as they have been discussed in and out of session, so I am trying to do that authentically and with integrity, but on a personal note, I agree entirely.

Now you have made me lose my place—I do beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Now the right hon. Gentleman has caused me to search again for my links.

Paragraph 4 of the Chairmen's report says:

"We . . . do not think it appropriate for us to express any collective view on the merits or demerits of the main procedural changes proposed; those are matters for the House as a whole to resolve".

However, the Chairmen then list a number of areas with which they take great issue.

The report pleads for an element of good will towards the Chairman. I say Chairman because it is called the Chairmen's Panel. It may be politically incorrect, but I think that it is the biblical sense of Chairman. We need good will anyway, do we not, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as Chairmen, sitting in that position of clinical impartiality? It is not always displayed, but it is always sought.

An important plea that we made, but which does not have total agreement in the panel, is for Standing Committees to be empowered to receive and publish written evidence. That is an important proposal, which could expedite the more careful and more comprehensive consideration of an issue under discussion and legislative consideration.

We are worried about what appears to be an attempt to limit probing amendments. Such an attempt would be understandable, because those who are experienced in

[Mr. Cook]

Committee procedure know that sometimes amendments are tabled and discussed that appear to make no sense. However, such amendments facilitate discussion around facts that might not be elicited in any other way and often clarify the issue. We are concerned that that might become a concrete proposal and we believe that it would be difficult to adapt to that.

The Leader of the House referred to our suggestions that the proposals should be extended across the board and described us as wanting to be more adventurous. Perhaps we do, but there is a much more practical point. If we were to confine the exercise of the measures to any particular range of Committees, there is a chance that some hon. Members—whether experienced or inexperienced—would operate in ignorance of some of the practical consequences of applying those rules.

The report also suggests that the Opposition should have access to advisers. I am afraid that we strongly oppose that idea. There are other ways of dealing with the issue, and we do not believe that that suggestion should be accepted at this stage. I believe also that Select Committees, which are reactive at present, should be empowered to be proactive.

Paragraph 5 is the most important paragraph in the Chairmen's Panel report. The Leader of the House said that the report was useful and would be considered, but she did not refer to any specifics. I hope that my right hon. Friend will provide an assurance on paragraph 5, which states:

"A general acceptance that the changes now proposed will be subject to review, refinement or even rescission before being written into the permanent standing orders of the House will be welcome."

I hope to receive that acceptance tonight.

6.52 pm

Mr. David Trimble (Upper Bann): I apologise to the Leader of the House for the fact that I was not present at the beginning of the debate, and consequently did not hear most of her speech. I had to deal with the consequences of a factory closure in my constituency and the loss of 500 jobs. That situation obviously merited my grave attention.

I wish to make several general points before dealing with some matters in detail. I welcome the fact that we have a Modernisation Committee and I welcome the reports. It is most encouraging that, at the beginning of the Parliament, the Government are prepared to look seriously at these issues and the way in which we do things. No matter what the procedures are, there is always scope for improvement.

Several hon. Members have said that the proposals build upon Jopling. I am sorry that they do not involve a more serious reconsideration of Jopling, as some hon. Members have serious reservations about how Jopling has operated in practice. Some aspects have worked well, but we believe that it has taken far too many important matters from the Floor of the House to be dealt with elsewhere. Several hon. Members complained that matters handled elsewhere—in Select Committees, Standing Committees, and so on—do not receive the attention that they deserve from hon. Members or from the wider community, and are not considered properly.

I cannot remember which hon. Member said, "If you want to keep something secret, say it in a Committee." I have never had the pleasure of serving on a Select Committee, but I have enjoyed my service on several Standing Committees. My pleasure was increased considerably when I discovered that only one Standing Committee *Hansard* goes to Northern Ireland—and it is not available to the general public. Therefore, I can say whatever I like in Standing Committee and no one will ever know. That gives me a great deal of freedom—particularly in the many Committees where I am the only floating voter.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)—I am sorry that he is not in the Chamber at present—referred to Standing Committees, and I thoroughly enjoyed his contribution. He made some extremely telling points and demonstrated that some of the problems about which hon. Members complain derive not from long-standing tradition but from changes made in the past 20 to 25 years.

Far too many changes made in the past few decades have diminished the role of the House and of individual Members, both Government and Opposition. The right hon. Gentleman concluded that legislative programming would be necessary to remedy that problem. He suggested that the trade-off would be that the Government get their legislation and the Opposition get their time.

I must qualify that point: the official Opposition may get their time, but what about the minority parties? Their number has increased, and is likely to increase still more if the electoral changes favoured by Labour Members are introduced. Unless I am mistaken, the composition of the Modernisation Committee follows the usual pattern: Government and Conservative Members and two token Liberal Democrats—Liberal Democrats are usually tokens in such circumstances.

What about the other minority parties? They are regularly ignored when the House conducts business and when Committees are formed. The record shows that minority parties usually get a raw deal in the membership of Select and Standing Committees. It is about time that someone gave greater consideration to minority parties, particularly when some parties—such as ours—are the Opposition in the regions of the United Kingdom that they represent. Paragraph 14(b) of the report states:

"The Opposition in particular and Members in general must have a full opportunity to discuss and seek to change provisions to which they attach importance."

In Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionists are the largest Opposition party, and then there are the other Northern Ireland parties. The "Opposition" in the context of this place are not relevant to a lot of Northern Ireland business—although we do not exclude other parties. Unlike hon. Members from other regions, we do not object to the presence of other hon. Members in the Chamber for Northern Ireland debates or their involvement in Northern Ireland business. However, a proper approach in that area would be welcome.

I wish to raise several matters regarding the report on the legislative process, some of which will strike hon. Members as predictable—but they deserve to be made none the less. Paragraph 19 and the following paragraphs refer to pre-legislative scrutiny and attach that to the policy of publishing Bills in draft form. The Leader of the House referred to the publication of draft Bills, and the Government seem to think that the use of draft Bills will change legislative scrutiny significantly.

I wonder whether, in forming that view, any attention was paid to the experience in Northern Ireland, where we have had that practice for 20 years. Virtually all

legislation has been published in draft for consultation, with periods that vary between a couple of months and more than a year between publication of the draft and enactment of the legislation.

The draft Bills published in Northern Ireland are not linked to any parliamentary procedure to provide scrutiny, so some of my comments must be qualified in that respect. If the Northern Ireland Office were honest and frank—it is difficult for it to admit this, and it runs against the culture of the Northern Ireland Office to do so—it would admit that the consultation procedures attached to draft legislation in Northern Ireland are a total failure. There is no significant response from society to draft Bills.

I speak not merely from my experience in the House, but from my experience before I came to the House, when I was concerned in my university and professional capacity with legislation in certain fields. Even with regard to legislation that was particularly relevant to the profession that I practised—legislation that might have directly affected the way in which members of the profession conducted their business and their livelihoods—it was enormously difficult to get people to look at draft legislation. It is only a draft. It might never happen and, if it does, who knows when—this week, next month or next year?

People would not look at draft legislation. Even if the legislation dealt with technical, legal matters that directly related to conveyancing—the source of income of most solicitors—one could not get them to look at drafts. The experience in Northern Ireland shows that society outside—I am not referring to what happens in the House—may not pay much attention to the publication of a draft.

It may be argued that the intention behind the proposal is to link the draft to some procedure in the House providing for scrutiny. That may make the process operate differently. I hope that it does. What is needed is a change in the way in which proposals for legislation evolve, not just before the publication of the legislation in draft or otherwise, but even beyond that point.

There is no reference in the report to what I consider to be the greatest problem: the passion that exists in the public service for secrecy—for not divulging to interested persons, whether in the House or outside, the way in which the thinking is evolving as legislative proposals are being drawn up.

In many respects, the enactment of a freedom of information Bill would be more significant in achieving the objectives of the report than any of the proposals contained in the report itself. An obligation on the Government to divulge more information and to let people see more clearly the Government's thinking and the reasons why they are developing particular proposals is more important than the parliamentary procedures.

I am not decrying the proposal for draft Bills. There must be a procedure linked to the legislation that gives adequate time for the examination not only of individual clauses, but of the thinking behind it. I regard as extremely important the suggestion that a Select Committee or a Special Standing Committee should examine legislation before the traditional Committee stage. That might be done in a First Reading Committee, or after Second Reading if a Special Standing Committee were used.

It is important that such a procedure should provide an opportunity for the Committee to take evidence and to examine the thinking underlying the Bill, and that sufficient time should be allowed for that. Time is needed for members of the Committee to get to grips with the Bill, and for the Department to think.

If one tables amendments in a normal Standing Committee, the initial response from the Minister and the Department is to put up the shutters, not because they object to changes in the Bill, but because they need time to think. The Minister will never accept an amendment at first sight. He will need to take it back to his Department, and the Department may have to consult other Departments. There must be sufficient time for the Department to absorb the material and bring it back to the Committee. That is why we so often find that amendments tabled in this House are accepted in the other place. Between the two stages, the Government have had time to consider their response.

I strongly support the suggestions made in the report for procedures such as those that would follow from a Special Standing Committee or a Select Committee. They should be linked not to draft legislation, but to actual Bills, as that would concentrate the mind. There should be sufficient time between the hearings and the beginning of the usual Committee stage for hon. Members to study and absorb that material.

Paragraph 83 of the report, which relates to European legislation and UK delegated legislation, states:

> "Of crucial and growing importance is the need to ensure proper scrutiny of the other forms of legislation with which the House has to deal, namely European legislation and United Kingdom secondary legislation."

I was disappointed to find that it omitted all reference to primary legislation relating to Northern Ireland. That is a scandal. The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) said that it was a crying disgrace when major parts of legislation go through the House without the clauses being examined and debated. That crying disgrace has applied to all primary legislation dealing with Northern Ireland for two decades.

Acres of Northern Ireland legislation have passed through the House without being debated or examined. I refer to primary legislation—Northern Ireland Orders in Council. On the current Order Paper, among the remaining orders to be considered are five Northern Ireland Orders in Council.

I remind hon. Members that, despite the use of the term Orders in Council, that is not delegated legislation. Northern Ireland Orders in Council are primary legislation, yet they will be enacted without being considered. There might be a brief debate in Committee, along the lines of a Second Reading debate, but, with few exceptions, Northern Ireland legislation is never subjected to Committee examination. That is a crying disgrace.

I shall not labour the point, except to say that we know that this Government will not have any better answer to the problem than the previous Government had. They were never able to justify the practice or put up any argument worth listening to. Ministers in the previous Government came to the Dispatch Box and brazened it out, year after year. Sadly, I think that the Labour Government will prove to be no better.

There is no excuse for substandard legislation. The existence of a separate statute book for Northern Ireland makes no more difference with regard to Northern Ireland

[Mr. David Trimble]

legislation than does the parallel situation with regard to Scottish legislation. A separate statute book in Scotland is maintained through normal legislation in the House. There is no excuse for what has happened for the past 20 years in respect of Northern Ireland legislation.

The problem must be dealt with. The report of the Hansard Society commission on the legislative process states in paragraph 363, which refers to the representations received from my colleagues and other parties:

"We hope that their special problems will be considered sympathetically—especially the case for returning to legislating for Northern Ireland by Acts rather than by Orders."

That report was published in 1992. Unfortunately, the previous Government failed to give sympathetic consideration to that crying disgrace, as the Hansard Society recommended. The Modernisation Committee refers to that report, so I hope that it will follow the recommendations of the Hansard Society report.

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will give the Government credit for the assurance that he has been given that the Northern Ireland police Bill will be introduced in the House.

Mr. Trimble: Indeed. The assurance was given after considerable representations were made by myself and my colleagues and after the Northern Ireland Office first informed us that it was its intention to proceed by Order in Council. I agree, that after representations were made, there was a concession. I do not know how many Orders in Council are proposed for this year, but there are five on the Order Paper and up to 10 might come through during the Session.

Mrs. Taylor: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will also agree that if measures are to be introduced by means of primary legislation in the House rather than by Orders in Council, which is what he is requesting, there will be some delay. The right hon. Gentleman is saying, in part, that Bills must be discussed in a proper way. He will understand that slots must be found for many different pieces of proposed legislation. The right hon. Gentleman must take into account the fact that there will be delays.

Mr. Trimble: That argument is not worthy of any attention. I am dealing with a matter of principle that turns on the enactment of primary legislation, and there is a proper procedure. Whatever the difficulties, there is no excuse for substandard procedure.

In any event, there is no substance in the right hon. Lady's argument, even in its own terms, because the bulk of Northern Ireland legislation is parity legislation. Only a handful of Northern Ireland primary Acts are unique to Northern Ireland, and the police Bill is one of them. Given the significance of the Bill, we made considerable representations to the Government for it to be enacted. I appreciate, of course, that the Bill will proceed in the proper way.

Most Orders in Council are what we call parity legislation. In substance, they are the same as legislation that is enacted in the House and they could be included in that process. That would not cause any difficulty. A significant number of Bills that pass through the House deal with Great Britain and not only England and Wales. Scotland is also included. Given the different statute book in Scotland, there are schedules attached to many Bills that modify the proposed legislation for application in Scotland. There would be no difficulty in principle in applying that process to Northern Ireland legislation, although it would mean a different way of going about things.

There will be some difficulty in making the transition, but it can be made. That would not involve a significant addition to the time that is taken in this place producing legislation. It would not involve the time implications to which the Leader of the House referred.

I shall conclude—[[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I am tempted not to conclude, but I shall.

I wish to refer to something that the Leader of the House said when in opposition. It is a comment that I take from the helpful research paper that has been prepared by the Library. The right hon. Lady was talking of

"the main project of re-engaging the gears of the political process in a fundamental way so that ordinary voters feel genuinely connected with the people who represent them."

I put a gloss on that in terms of the need to feel connected with those in this place who enact legislation.

Society in Northern Ireland is disconnected from the political and legislative processes and from the way in which the House proceeds. My colleagues and I have made considerable efforts over the past decade and a half to try to ensure that society in Northern Ireland is connected, informed and plugged into proceedings in Westminster. That is why we attach so much importance to ensuring that there is a Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and a Northern Ireland Grand Committee. It is why we have also attached so much importance to arguing that proper legislation is enacted and that people in Northern Ireland have the same opportunity as those in the rest of the United Kingdom to express a view about proposed legislation.

7.13 pm

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): I am happy to follow some of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), because he has raised important issues about Northern Ireland legislation being properly considered, scrutinised and consulted on during our deliberations. I am sure that the Select Committee on Modernisation will wish to take his comments on board.

There is a narrow window of opportunity at the beginning of an historic new Parliament when a third of the Members are fresh and new. It is important to grasp the opportunity that is before us. With such a large influx of new Members, we are not necessarily talking about changing old habits; we are thinking about how best to deliver the legislative process. I congratulate the Chair of the Modernisation Committee on taking the initiative, pushing ahead with it and ensuring that a report was produced in July, thereby ensuring that the debate is taking place today.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who were not members of the Committee, but who, in my view, put their fingers on the nub of the report, which is that we shall make progress in a variety of ways if we recognise the need for legislation to be programmed.

There must be a structure and a timetable, which could well involve rolling legislation over through more than one Session. As my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) said, we are elected for a Parliament, and a parliamentary term is five years. We should be able satisfactorily to span what any Government want to do in five years and ensure the best use of our time. The crux of the report is making the best use of our time in the Chamber and in Committee and as individual Members.

We should, of course, have pride in the past and in how Parliament has grown up. I still take visitors to the third step in Westminster Hall and point to the plaque which represents the place where Parliament took control over the monarchy. It is an important point and that represents the pride that we need to have, as well as pride in stimulating debate and winning debates by argument.

The best tradition of this place is when we win our arguments in debate because we have a good case. That being so, it is important properly to programme, by agreement through the usual channels, rather than to filibuster, to delay and to introduce guillotines, which means that we are cut short and parts of proposed legislation are not properly considered. That is the crux of the report.

There are three important reasons why we should see the report as one step on the way to moving our constitution forward. The first reason is that Parliament needs to come to terms with the micro chip, which is revolutionising our lives in many ways. It is not impossible to do that. I am pleased that the Committee has taken on board the need to move forward with voting arrangements. As I said in Committee, few of us gain access to our cash by taking a cheque book to a bank before 3.30 pm, signing our name and asking for £50. We all use our plastic cards, go to a slot in the wall and get the cash much more quickly. I accept the need for us to come together to vote, but it would be easier, speedier and more convenient if we used the microchip. That is a small step, but I am sure that it would lead to other ways of using our time better.

Secondly, we have a new gender balance in the House. That has not been mentioned yet this afternoon, but, to the public outside, it is one of the most striking results of 1 May. Wherever one goes, people say that Parliament must be very different now. I sometimes thinks that it would be nice if it were a little more different than it sometimes seems to be. We need to make even further progress with that gender balance and recognise that that will lead to a different, more consensual style of debate with more concentration on an issue.

I support a 10-minute limit on speeches, but I do not agree that that will kill interventions because injury time can be attached, as in football matches. However, debating behaviour has been influenced by the new make-up of the House, which I welcome. That is another reason why we need to take the modernisation process further.

Thirdly, the public expect a lot from this new Parliament and from us as Members of Parliament. Those who have been Members of Parliament for a while have been embarrassed by reports of the public's low—sometimes rock bottom—opinion of us and our work. That needs to change. We need the respect from the public that we believe Parliament should have. We will not have that respect unless we bring our parliamentary procedures and behaviour into the 21st century.

In that regard, the most important issue is how to raise the status of all Committees—Standing Committees, Select Committees and scrutiny Committees. As many hon. Members have said, that is where the hard work is done and where many of the best debates take place. The answer is not to deal with everything on the Floor of House. The solution is within our grasp, and it is to raise the status of debates in Committees.

That may have an implication for the way in which the media views those Committees. Programmes such as "In Committee" will play their part in that. We may need more television cameras in all the Committee Rooms. If we are honest, it is what goes out on television and on the radio that people know about. I strongly support that. Many hon. Members have considered how to raise the status of scrutiny and I hope that the Committee will discuss that further.

The Modernisation Committee has been useful. We have had some interesting discussions. We cannot consider changing things without debate and that has sometimes led to philosophical discourse about what legislation is, what the House is for, what Government is, what the Opposition should be able to do to frustrate the Government, how minority parties should fit into a debating Chamber such as this, how the public should relate to the House and, finally but importantly, how Members of Parliament operate here while managing to keep for themselves a satisfactory existence, which is not always easy.

This is just the first of what I hope will be a useful series of reports from the Select Committee. I pay tribute to the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), and the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) for treating the issue so seriously and with such urgency.

7.25 pm

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I am the 10th Member of the House to speak in the debate and the first of the new intake from 1 May, and it is from that one third of Members who are new to the House that much of the pressure for modernisation has come. However, it is encouraging to those new hon. Members on the Committee that hon. Members with much more experience than us share many of our concerns.

Earlier, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) criticised the choice of trustees for the parliamentary contributory pension fund. New Members were seriously under-represented on the Modernisation Committee, but those of us who were there hope that we punched our weight on behalf of other new colleagues; if we failed, I am sure that they will let us know.

New Members bring to the House a perception of what it looks like from the outside, because, until recently, we were on the outside. If something is not broken, there is no need to mend it. But the outside world has a clear perception that Parliament does have defects which need to be remedied.

The quality of the law making is criticised by professional bodies and the general public. There is example after example. It is not just partisan legislation that has gone wrong—the poll tax is an example of partisan discussion failing to deal adequately with

[Mr. Andrew Stunell]

technical defects—but legislation on which there has been consensus, of which the Child Support Act 1995 is an example. The quality of legislation is not determined by consensus or partisanship but by effectiveness. The Modernisation Committee was given figures showing the sheer number of Government amendments to their own legislation. When it comes to law making, there is a constant catching-up process.

The effectiveness of the monitoring of Departments and Ministers has also been criticised. That relates to the way in which Select Committees and the Chamber operate. The feeling that the accountability of Governments, Ministers and Departments, has declined in recent years was a driving force.

Before we consider too much the practical convenience of Members, we should remember that the House of Commons has a purpose, which is not necessarily the convenience of Members. I hope that those new Members on the Modernisation Committee were able to bring to it a sharper perception of what the outside world thinks as well as what hon. Members think.

That does not mean that the practical convenience of the House cannot be improved. I look forward to the discussions on the hours, the days and the calendar which lie ahead. I hope, too, that we can tackle some of the strange customs of the House which range from the trivial to the serious. One of my favourites is that when I tried to ask whether a Minister would or would not do something I was told that that parliamentary question was out of order because one cannot ask a Minister "whether", only "if". Such trivial restrictions require some thought.

Much more serious than that are some of the issues mentioned by the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike). It is inconceivable to outsiders that our national legislature does not have a seat for each Member of Parliament Surely no other trade or profession fails to provide people with a seat in which to do the job.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): The London underground.

Mr. Stunell: The hon. Gentleman makes a sound point. The hours, if not the rates of pay, are comparable.

The right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) has left the Chamber, but I wanted to deal with his practical point. To the best of my knowledge, he did not ask to be a member of the Modernisation Committee, and neither he nor any member of his party wrote or submitted briefings to it, so I was sorry to hear what he had to say about the level of representation that he had been able to secure.

The report is good as far as it goes. I welcome what it says about pre-legislative inquiries and draft Bills being put before Select Committees. The idea that Committees can participate in post-legislative monitoring to discover what has happened and to comment on it has not been mentioned much in the debate, but it will be important.

The timetabling provisions are sensible. No doubt some practical difficulties will have to be overcome, but they cannot be greater than the practical difficulties of spending several hours talking about clauses 1 and 2, and a few minutes on clauses 3 to 99.

I support the points that have been made about Select Committees, but I want to use my time wisely, so I shall move on to talk about the reform of our voting procedure. It is clear that there is scope for better procedures to be used. Not even my best friends would regard me as a friend of the silicon chip, but the House ought to make certain changes.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) referred to the criticisms of the Chairmen's Panel. As he was unable to participate in some of the Committee's discussions, he may have missed some of the important points that have been made. Any speaking limit should allow for injury time to take account of interventions. We should not reduce the capacity of hon. Members to participate in a flowing debate.

The hon. Member for Stockton, North was critical of the proposal for a preliminary debate on whether a clause should stand part of a Bill followed by a discussion of the amendments. We dealt extensively with that matter in the Committee, but it is worth having a debate on a wider platform. If I were not keen to limit my remarks, I would expand on that, but perhaps the Committee could prepare a more structured and complete note for hon. Members, so that they are more fully aware of the arguments in support of that proposal.

I add my thanks to the Leader of the House for the way in which she has conducted the Committee. Today, she has skilfully worn two different hats: as Chairman of the Committee and as the person responding to the debate on behalf of the Government. I was particularly pleased that she mentioned two Bills that the Government intend will go through the draft Bill procedure.

Before the recess, I asked the Library to supply me with a list of previous recommendations and reports on reform and to identify those that have not been implemented. The Library said, "Are you sure that you know what you are asking for? How far back do you want to go"? I decided that I would go back 10 years. The reports that have not been implemented in the past 10 years make a substantial pile on my desk. I say to the Leader of the House, in her role as a representative of the Government, that sweet words in this debate and a couple of draft Bills are fine, but we need evidence of serious and sustained implementation by the Government of the proposals over which they have control.

That brings me to the future work of the Committee. I would be failing in my duty as a Liberal Democrat Member if I did not mention again the seating and shape of the Chamber, and the way in which it operates. Most people do not find the Houses of Parliament visitor friendly or family friendly; nor do they think that it delivers legislation efficiently, effectively and well. The work of the Modernisation Committee and of other Committees should be directed at correcting those perceptions and ensuring that the House has secure procedures that operate well, protect minority and opposition interests and deliver good government. If we put our minds to it, surely 659 of us could achieve that.

Combined action is required. No one has yet dared mention the other place, but we know that within the next five years fundamental reforms will take place at the other end of this building. That will perhaps give us an opportunity to consider how procedures in both Houses could interact more effectively in the future. If the Government are prepared to deal with fundamental

reforms at the other end of the building, I hope that they will not shy away from discussion and implementation of fundamental reforms at this end.

Action is required from a large number of hon. Members who serve on Committees. That effort should be made not only by the 15 members of the Modernisation Committee, who I hope will produce more reports in the future; there should also be a strong commitment from hon. Members who are not on the Committee.

All these good intentions could merely be added to that pile on my desk. We could come back in 10 years' time little further forward. I hope that the Government and all hon. Members will work together to avoid that happening.

7.37 pm

Dr. Tony Wright (Cannock Chase): I can reassure the House that I shall make only a few general remarks as quickly as I can. They flow nicely from the remarks that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) has just made.

As a student too many years ago, I was made to read "The Reform of Parliament" by Bernard Crick, which was published in 1964. Those who do not have time to read the book should read the preface, which says:

"Parliamentary reform is one of those things, as Mark Twain remarked about the weather, which everybody talks about, but nobody does anything about. Seldom has there been so much public agreement that something should be done, but seldom so much private agreement that nothing is likely to be done."

I am afraid that that is the truth of the matter, and it explains the pile on the hon. Gentleman's desk.

It so happens that Bernard Crick—who I am glad to say is now my friend—is now devising the new procedures for the Scottish Parliament. It will be an interesting, innovative and modern place. This House will look extremely old-fashioned when the Scottish Parliament is established. It will be a challenge to this House to put its own procedures in order.

This may be the moment when we stop talking about reform and start doing something about it. That may be the importance of this debate. The House is full of new Members and is far more representative than ever before. It looks different, feels different and has a radical energy about it. If this House cannot do this job, no House ever will. That is the nature of the moment and the opportunity that we are discussing—at a time when we have a radical general programme of political and constitutional reform of which these proposals are a part. We said that we would reform the British political system, and we are doing so. We said that the reform of the House of Commons was an essential part of that, and it is. These proposals sit not as a separate item, but as part of a general reform programme.

Perhaps most remarkable of all—it helps to explain why nothing much has happened on this front before, and it is, perhaps, the greatest tribute to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—is the fact that here are a Government who are helping along and engineering a series of measures that, if implemented, will make life more difficult for Ministers and for Governments. Here are a Government with the biggest majority in modern times, proposing a set of measures designed to make life—in some respects—more difficult for themselves. Why? I am afraid that the answer is that they believe in those measures. They believe that the time has come to modernise British political institutions, and to modernise this institution critically. They believe that the quality of legislation and the public interest demand that reform must be made. Surprising as it may seem that this is the moment, it turns out to be the moment when reforms seem finally and seriously to be happening.

We know about the problem. We know that the way in which the House considers legislation is a scandal and a disgrace. It is the bit of the system that we dare not expose to public view. It is a good job that people do not know in detail what happens. We tell stories among ourselves about the horrors of Standing Committees, but we are glad that that is not the general verdict that is delivered on our performance.

Example after example has been given. A definitive account of the poll tax has been written. The poll tax was the greatest policy disaster of modern times. It cost £1.5 billion: that is the cost of error, equivalent to about 2p on the standard rate of income tax. Hon. Members should read a book by David Butler and his colleagues called "Failure in British Government", which takes apart the way in which the House looked at—or did not look at—the poll tax. If there were more time, I would go into the details; I will give hon. Members the headlines.

"The Standing Committee was a futile marathon . . . the committee stage was mostly a matter of posturing . . . it was scrutiny by slogan and soundbite."

That can be replayed, Bill by Bill by Bill, Committee by Committee by Committee. That is why it is a scandal. That is why we are not discussing esoteric or internal issues. We are talking about the quality of legislation that affects the lives of all the people whom we represent. If we legislate badly, those people must live with the consequences—consequences that they will subsequently tell us about in our surgeries. That is why what we are talking about tonight matters; but it also forces us to ask why the change is not made. In essence, it is not made because of the way in which this place operates. Someone once described it as a permanent election campaign, and that is essentially what it is. There are good reasons why it should be that, but, if it is just that, it will not do what it has to do.

Yes, we all come here not because we carry wonderful individual virtues, but because we carry party labels; but, if we know only that, we shall never become Members of Parliament performing the functions that the textbooks say Members of Parliament should perform—functions that the House is supposed to perform. Enoch Powell once memorably said that there was no such thing as Parliament, only Government and Opposition. There is a terrible truth in that. What we have are Government and Opposition, locked into a permanent election campaign on the Floor of the House, in Committee and in every part of the system. The price that is paid for it just to be that is, I am afraid, the quality—or lack of quality—of the product that comes out.

We must reflect on the nature of the institution. We must ask why scrutiny is not rewarded—why there is no career structure in the House of Commons that rewards those who take scrutiny seriously; why the system is driven only by Whips and greasy poles; why there are not other avenues in which people of great talent and ability representing constituents can find a way of serving. I wish that the Modernisation Committee, to which I pay enormous tribute, had taken just a little time to say something rather more general about the importance of

[Dr. Tony Wright]

Parliament as Parliament, and what its central functions were. It could then have gone on to say things about legislative reform.

We know what the reform agenda is; we have always known. For me, the most telling sentence in the report is this, in paragraph 15:

"With one or two notable exceptions, such as the creation of "First Reading" Committees, the House could, if it so wished, do a great deal without a single amendment to Standing Orders."

The House has, over the years, invented ways of improving the process, but it has done nothing about them. The Special Standing Committee procedure is the best example of that.

We heard from the Opposition that they were against incorporating the European convention on human rights in our law. There was nothing to stop the House, over the years, from setting up a human rights committee. It could have scrutinised every piece of legislation to ensure that it was consistent with the convention, and with all our other human rights obligations. If it had done that, it would have more credibility in saying that we did not need to incorporate the convention because we had our own methods. But it did nothing of the kind: it showed no interest in such matters. That could have been done, but it was not done.

I have just two more things to say. First, I must express disappointment. I think that, on the question of constitutional Bills, the Committee sold the pass. I understand why: its members clearly could not agree. Those outside who have considered the matter seriously understand the need to ensure that constitutional Bills are not all caught by a doctrine casually invented in 1945—the doctrine involving Bills of first-class constitutional importance. No one can define them—no one knows what is a first-class, a second-class or a third-class Bill—but, simply for political reasons, it has been asserted that all such Bills must be taken on the Floor of the House.

I do not think that at all sensible. We have made great progress on the Finance Bill by taking some of its clauses in Standing Committee and some on the Floor of the House. Doing that improves the quality of scrutiny. Was not the Local Government Act 1985, which abolished the Greater London council and swept away metropolitan counties, a Bill of first-class constitutional importance? But it was not taken on the Floor of the House.

When I first came to the House, I sat on the Committee considering the Right to Know Bill of 1993, a private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent, Central (Mr. Fisher). It was an excellent Committee stage, in which hon. Members on both sides participated fully. We knew that the Government would kill the Bill at the end of the day, but, my goodness, it was a good Committee. No one could pretend that the process would have been improved if the Bill had been taken on the Floor of the House, but I suspect that we shall be told that such Bills are of first-class constitutional importance, and therefore cannot be treated in that way. We should look at the end that we want, which is improved scrutiny, and not play political games with the process.

Let me now come to the heart of what I wanted to say. The Committee has come up with a menu. It has said that there are a variety of devices whereby the legislative process could be improved: ad hoc Select Committees, Special Standing Committees, Second Reading Committees and First Reading Committees. That is the menu from which we can choose. The question is: will it happen?

Three things are required for it to happen: first, a Leader of the House who is radical, energetic, innovative and wants to lead, and I think that we have that; secondly—this is the crucial point—Ministers and civil servants with Ministers who are prepared to expose their Bills to the menu of scrutiny that the Committee is proposing. That is the most challenging point of all. Thirdly, the Opposition need to understand that scrutiny can be constructive and not merely oppositional. We shall find out soon whether those all conditions are in place. The public interest requires that they are.

In every other area of life, we search for common ground. We seek to arrive at decisions by going from positions of difference to a position of common ground. This institution is different because, laser-like, it searches for disagreement. That is what makes this place distinctive. That is why people have lost confidence in it and rumbled it. That is why we say that any talk of a new politics means doing politics differently in this place too.

7.50 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): During this interesting debate, several references have been made to the record number of new Members in this Parliament. I compliment many of them on having the fortitude to sit through this debate and I am sure that the House looks forward to hearing their comments on these important issues.

I am reminded of my feelings on being elected to the House 10 years ago. I felt that the whole procedure was archaic and that working methods, the conditions that we endured and the hours were unacceptable. Many a time, I would remonstrate with the then Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). I now realise, however, that I was somewhat impetuous. As time progressed, I realised that evolution, rather than revolution, was important in the House of Commons and that we should, as far as possible, try to make existing systems work better.

In reaching an understanding of what we are about, it is important that we should remind ourselves of the exact role of the Back Bencher. It is not necessarily to support the Executive; indeed, it is the opposite. Our role is to control the Executive—to hold it to account. There is a distinction between the role of the Government in getting their business through and the role of Back Benchers in ensuring that the Government do not run roughshod over the rights of Back Benchers and of the people whom they represent.

Hon. Members are a vital component of our democracy. We are the people who are charged with the responsibility of balancing the aspirations of people whom we represent and the ambitions of the Executive, who may, from time to time, have an entirely different agenda.

We would all be wise to note the words of the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who drew attention to the fact that the power of the Opposition was the time that they have historically enjoyed in the House. He said that that time had been severely curtailed

and made the valid point that we all had a right to put our view and to be heard. It is a long-standing feature of our parliamentary democracy that opposition should be heard.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) rightly chided the Government for having ridden somewhat roughshod over Parliament in introducing various measures. The Labour party must realise, as any democrat would, that all hon. Members are elected and deserve to, and must, be heard. It would perhaps not be amiss for the new Government to realise that fewer people voted for them than for all the other parties represented in the House, so a majority of the electorate did not vote for the Government.

Indeed, it is unusual for a Government to command more than 50 per cent. of the votes cast at a general election, but that is not my point. Notwithstanding the fact that they have a huge majority, they have to allow time for hon. Members who represent the millions of people who voted differently to put their case, to argue with the Government in debate and to challenge features of their policies that we feel should be challenged.

Mr. Salter: I always find it bewildering when Conservative Members talk about the proportion of votes. Do I take it that the hon. Gentleman supports electoral reform and will back proportional representation?

Mr. Gill: The hon. Gentleman misunderstands the point that I am trying to make, which is simple. The fact that the Labour Government have a majority of 179 in this Parliament does not mean that they can push through their legislation without regard to the legitimate views of other Members, who have been elected by a substantial number of votes. On 1 May, more people in the UK voted for parties other than the Labour party. The point at issue is that, if our system is to be in any way democratic, the representatives of the people have to have an opportunity to put their view and to be heard. The right hon. Member for Ashton–under–Lyne was right.

I welcome the report's conclusions in paragraph 91, although I note the comments by the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) on the experiences in Northern Ireland. I have been a long-term advocate of channelling legislation through Select Committees, because they could enormously improve legislation. I remind the House that the departmental Select Committees are relatively new. They were instituted in 1979, when the Conservative party had just formed a new Government, in much the same way as the Labour party has just taken the reins of office.

The advantage in referring draft legislation to Select Committees is that the legislation would be considered at an early stage by a group of people who would have built up expertise in the appropriate sector. More to the point—this may apply more to Labour than to Opposition Back Benchers—if draft legislation were channelled through departmental Select Committees, Committee members would have greater job satisfaction. They would feel that they were doing something worth while and contributing to something that had a future—legislation that would progress through the House and eventually be enacted. The benefits would be not just to Members of Parliament, but to the general public and the people whom we represent. I believe that that process would mean that we had a more transparent system of consultation.

Government Departments currently assure us that consultation is carried out with appropriate bodies before legislation is brought to the House. However, we have no way of knowing how thorough that consultation has been and, without many searching questions, we cannot find out who has been consulted. One is wary of the fact that Departments and Ministers are busy and that consultation may not have taken place with all those who might wish to have some input into the legislation. Through the Select Committee procedure there is scope for following up any matters arising from the evidence taken. All that would give rise to better legislation and, more to the point, would save time, not just on the Floor of the House but in Standing Committees.

There has already been reference to the number of amendments being presented to much of the legislation that has come before the House. Sometimes, the number has been unacceptably high. That is a great indictment of the way in which the legislation reached that stage.

I am tempted to say that we have too much legislation. When it comes to ordering the business of the House, the Executive might consider bringing less legislation before us so that the legislation that they do present can be given more time and be considered in more detail. In that way, the legislation reaching the statute book would be better.

In advocating the role of departmental Select Committees in considering draft legislation, I do not want to detract in any way from their important work of scrutinising Government Departments. I commend the suggestion in the report that they should have a role in monitoring recent legislation; in other words, that there should be a follow-up procedure for legislation once it has been enacted. Nor do we want to lose sight of the vital role of Select Committees in investigating matters of public interest on an ad hoc basis.

The important matter of debating Select Committee reports on the Floor of the House has been mentioned. Too few of their reports come to the House and hon. Members, certainly those who serve on those Committees, would like to think that there will be a greater opportunity for the result of their labours to be discussed on the Floor of the House at some stage.

Different views have been expressed about the paragraph in the report which refers to carrying over legislation from one Session to the next. A former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk, said that he thought that that was a good thing, but my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) disagreed with him. I find myself in agreement with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon. If Governments have the scope to roll over legislation into the next Session, it would cut across the points made so ably by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne. Time is of the essence for the Opposition and we would be forfeiting one of the essential rights of the Opposition if we allowed the Government to roll over legislation.

8.3 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): As another newly elected Member who was a member of the Select Committee, I must say that that membership has been a fascinating experience and has given me a crash course at least in the theory of current parliamentary procedures. I am grateful to the more experienced members of the Committee who have been forbearing in

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

explaining the complexity of the procedures to me. I hope that all my fellow new Members have read the report and that they keep by them the handy chart in the report, which is the clearest exposition of all the different options available to us to exploit the procedures of the House to try to make it more effective.

Members of the public watching Parliament on television must be forgiven for thinking that the most important parts of the work of the House of Commons are questions to the Prime Minister and other Ministers. Holding Ministers to account is crucial, but the major output of Parliament is legislation. If that legislation is faulty, it can have a highly significant effect on people's lives, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright).

I am not against referring to hon. Members by their constituency, but I would find it easier if the annunciator gave our constituency in brackets under our name. That would allow us to listen to the debate instead of having to scrabble around in text books trying to find out the constituencies of various hon. Members. That is an example of the way in which the traditions of the House interfere with debate rather than facilitate it.

I believe that the key aims of the recommendations made in the report are to improve the effectiveness of Parliament and Members of Parliament and to improve the quality of legislation. Those two things are interlinked. The shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), talked about the red heat of political debate and about this being a continuous election campaign. We have all been elected as party political people and we all have deeply held and passionate party political views. It would be naive to try to deny that.

We should accept that two different things take place within the legislative process. The first is the argument in principle about the aims of a Bill. That will always be party political and will sometimes involve debates between factions within individual parties. The second part of the legislative process is discussion of the detail of the legislation—the detail which is vital to make it work. The recognition of that split is crucial.

It is not helpful if any alteration to a Bill, however minor, is seen as a defeat for the Government. A defeat on the principle of a Bill would be a defeat for the Government, but improvements to the detail can be made by Opposition Members and by Government Back Benchers and following suggestions from outside organisations. We should not engender an atmosphere in which the Government try to defend everything. I believe that acceptance of constructive amendments is a sign of strength in a Government, not a sign of weakness.

The Opposition should be able to oppose a Bill in principle and then, having lost the vote on that—that will inevitably happen in this Parliament—they should make constructive suggestions about how to make the Bill work, even if they do not agree with it in the first place. That is why I believe that in Committee it should be possible first to take a vote on the principle of a clause, allowing the Opposition to make their point, and then to go on to discuss the detailed implementation of the Bill. The Opposition could then make positive and constructive comments without that being taken as support for the principle of the Bill. Those somewhat detailed proposals are incredibly important if we are to make this place work more effectively.

Another important aspect of making this place work more effectively is to ensure that we fully use the wide range of expertise of Members of Parliament and the external organisations that try to give advice to the House. That would all help to achieve better quality legislation. That is why I support the proposals on draft legislation and for a much more imaginative use of Committees, including pre-legislative Committees, and for a more deliberative and less confrontational style of debate in those Committees.

As I have said, Parliament now has a large number of Members with a huge range of expertise, and we must use that effectively. Like the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), my personal preference is for having ad hoc pre-legislative and Special Standing Committees rather than departmental Select Committees for pre-legislative work. That would diffuse work among Members, rather than concentrating it. Members with specialist knowledge, such as on pensions, sometimes do not serve on the relevant Select Committee.

My second point—it is very late and I have not eaten for hours, so perhaps I have lost track and it is my third point—is about programming. Programming of legislation is extremely important. It is important that it is tailored to each Bill. Some Bills do not require much detailed discussion and should be whipped through Committee. Others may need a lot of detailed discussion and should have many Committee sittings. Programming will allow time for the parts of each Bill that need full discussion to be fully discussed. It will stop the time wasting on relatively uncontentious parts of a Bill, which I am led to believe occurs under the present procedure.

Programming is also important because it helps individual Members to use their time most effectively. It brings a certain predictability to the legislative process, which not only is advantageous to individual Members but helps to achieve effective scrutiny. If Members can plan their time more effectively, they are likely to be better prepared when issues that they believe are important are debated and when they take part in such debates.

I refute the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), who seemed to think that programming was all about accelerating the progress of Bills. That is not necessarily so. Programming is about accelerating through parts that do not need much discussion and giving time to parts that do need it.

I accept that, to begin with, discussions on programming will have to take place through the usual channels, but I hope that, in future, that process becomes less opaque. I do not think that the usual channels are entirely consistent with the transparency that most of us espouse.

The Modernisation Committee will discuss the conduct of debate. I want to make two points. First, hon. Members with some experience tend to wax lyrical about the virtue of debate in the House and the importance of its cut and thrust. It really does not encourage Members from the 1997 intake to take part in debates when the custom of the House is to keep such Members waiting until everybody else has spoken—unless one is lucky enough to be a member of a party that has very few representatives, in which case one is advanced up the order. The House needs to take note of that. It is also a fact that most of my hon. Friends and I have been

listening with patience to our more senior colleagues, yet few of them have had the courtesy to wait and listen to what we wish to say.

My second point arises from my experience in the Chamber yesterday during Prime Minister's Question Time. I really wondered whether any Opposition Members—none of those whom I particularly noticed and about whom I am about to complain is present—had any understanding of the way in which our behaviour is perceived by the public. Of course I understand that it is the role of Opposition Members—they are absolutely justified in that role—robustly to question Ministers and try to demonstrate what they perceive are Government errors, but the yelling, the gesturing and the frankly boorish behaviour which seems to have become traditional simply give the impression of a barrack room rather than a serious attempt to hold the Government to account. It brings the House into disrepute—and that is played back every weekend when I speak to people in my constituency.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the hon. Lady accept that such behaviour did not begin on 1 May?

Dr. Starkey: I accept that absolutely. Obviously, I was not in the House before 1 May. The fact that such behaviour may have gone on before is absolutely no excuse for it continuing. This is a new Parliament. The public have a new attitude to politicians; it is not one of much respect. All of us—both new and old Members—must live up to our responsibility to try to rehabilitate Parliament in the eyes of the public. I do not absolve some of my hon. Friends from some of the boorish behaviour.

I very much hope that the report's recommendations on the legislative process are accepted and rapidly put into effect. I very much hope that this is just the start of a modernisation of Parliament that will renew the public's interest and confidence in what we all do as Members of Parliament.

8.14 pm

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): I am pleased to be able to participate in this debate. I say to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) that it has not taken fortitude for me to remain in the Chamber throughout the debate. As a new Member of Parliament, I have found it interesting and informative. This debate has given me the opportunity to make my maiden speech.

I was proud and privileged to be elected to the House on 1 May for a number of reasons—one being that I hail from the city of Derby. I was born there and have lived and worked there all my life. Prior to being elected, I served for about 18 years—at times it seemed longer—as an elected member of Derby city council. I therefore believe that I bring to the House a great knowledge and considerable experience of the concerns, worries and aspirations of the electors of the city of Derby.

I also know some of the reasons why newcomers to the city of Derby grow to love the place. Derby has been described over the years as the biggest village in England. It has a population of about 250,000. On occasions, however, it takes me a couple of hours to travel a few hundred yards through the city centre. The people are very friendly, want to exchange views with me, seek my opinions and of course, on many occasions, bend my ear.

The political history of Derby is quite interesting. The seat of Derby, North came into existence only in 1950. Prior to that, since—I am advised—1299, Derby sent two Members of Parliament from one constituency, the longest serving Member of Parliament being the late Lord Noel Baker, who had a most distinguished parliamentary and international career.

On a statistical note, over the past century Derby has returned 16 men to Westminster, which is perhaps a somewhat dubious tradition for me to continue. It is dubious because I am pleased to say that, as a result of the election, we have so many women in this Parliament.

One reassuring statistic, which enlivens me fairly considerably, is that the average age of the previous 16 Members of Parliament at their death was 80.5 years and five of them were nonagenarians. Representing Derby, North obviously prolongs life. Subject to the vagaries of the election process, I might be around for a while.

The election on 1 May was my second attempt to win the constituency of Derby, North for the Labour party. I also contested it in 1992. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Greg Knight, whom I always found a most friendly and approachable parliamentarian. He rose to a position of some influence in the Conservative Government, perhaps as a result of his almost total loyalty to the their policies. However, if he had been given the opportunity on 28 November to vote on the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), I feel sure that he would have supported it, because he felt especially strongly about that issue and had voted accordingly on previous occasions.

One of the difficulties Greg experienced as the Deputy Chief Whip of the Conservative was being termed, affectionately, "silent Knight", because he could not contribute to debates. It was only during the later stages of his parliamentary career, from late 1996 onwards, when he became a Minister and started to spread his wings a little, that he became more well known in the city that he had ably served for the previous 14 years.

Greg took the seat 14 years ago from my friend and colleague Phillip Whitehead, who will be remembered by many hon. Members with affection. I am pleased to say that he continues to represent the interests of Derby's citizens in the new, redefined European constituency. He continues to do an excellent job on behalf of his constituents.

Derby has been supported by two industrial pillars—the aerospace and rail industries. Rolls-Royce Aerospace is enjoying a resurgence, and only today the Government announced that its bid for funds to develop its large engine range has been agreed. The total sum will amount to up to £200 million and I am delighted to have had the opportunity, since May, to play some small part in ensuring that that money has been made available. It will give Rolls-Royce the opportunity to develop large engines for the new range of larger jets produced by Boeing and British Aerospace. Rolls-Royce is at the leading edge of technology and the money will enable the company to seize a greater share of the world market with its Trent engine.

The rail industry, however, has a somewhat sadder history. Many of us were greatly concerned by the previous Government's rail privatisation proposals,

[Mr. Bob Laxton]

mainly because while the legislation was being completed, the rail manufacturing industry suffered a complete vacuum of orders. As a result, the United Kingdom rail industry started to collapse and in York, for example, all rail manufacturing activity ceased. I pay tribute to the Swedish—not English—senior management of Asea Brown Boveri, now Adtranz, who stuck with Derby through a lean period when no orders came in for three years. The company has managed to stay in Derby and kept the core work force and design team together. Only a few days ago, I visited Wembley at the company's invitation to look at the new train it has designed and built for Chiltern Railways. Adtranz is on the way back, and not before time.

Derby, North is the commuter area of the city and, because of the two main pillars of aerospace and rail manufacturing, most people who live there have worked, work or will work—again, in some cases—for those industries. The city is doing reasonably well and has attracted many small and medium enterprises that are doing especially well. I have to say—and not only as a previous leader of Derby city council—that that success is due in no small measure to the combined efforts of the city council, Derbyshire county council, the private sector, Derby university, and many other agencies. All those bodies have worked together in close partnership to ensure that we sell Derby as a city of the future, through the Derby city partnership, which has proved to be a great success.

It would be remiss of me, and I would probably face justified criticism, not to refer to the role that Derby's sporting activities are now playing on the national and international stage. Some people would say that Derby County football club—the Rams—has perhaps the most international team in the land, and it is doing well in the premier league. I played some part in the club's move from the old Baseball ground to a new, state-of-the-art, 30,000-seat stadium at Pride park. I am delighted that the club is getting capacity audiences there. I also pay tribute to the foresight of the club's directors, who went out on a financial limb to fund the project, and I wish the club well in the future.

I shall now turn to the modernisation process that we are debating. After 18 years in local government, one learns to study legislation—and its legal interpretations—closely and I have always said that the devil is in the detail. For example, paragraph 4(iii)(a) of the Afghan light railway act 1726 will be the bit that causes endless confusion. It is the detail that stops people doing what they want to do. On my arrival in the House, I found it interesting to examine the Order Paper in some detail. Despite my extensive experience in interpreting legislation, again as a result of my time in local government, the Order Paper defeated me very early. Of course, a number of colleagues assured me that they understood it perfectly, but it took only a few nanoseconds of questions before they decided to terminate our conversation. I quickly concluded that they understood it little better than I did, although some of them had been Members of Parliament for many years. I am delighted that we have already ensured that the Order Paper is more readily understandable, because that is immense progress.

The programming of legislation is also important. Even from my limited experience in the House, I have concluded that we need to try to ensure some certainty in the legislative process and its timing. I note from the report that the Modernisation Committee intends to consider the balance between the times when the House sits and the recesses, although it has not discussed that issue yet. That is long overdue. Many of us found it strange to work here for three months and then to leave for three months. When we came back, the learning process had to start again. Establishing a better balance between the periods when the House is in recess and when it is sitting would be to the advantage of us all.

I welcome the Modernisation Committee's report. From my limited experience, I have seen that we must be forward-looking and move from the 17th or 18th century at least some way towards the 21st. Many colleagues have made excellent points about the way in which we are perceived by the public, who find some of our customs archaic. I have no great difficulty with some of the customs and practices of the House—I am not someone who wants to come in and turn the applecart upside down. Some of our customs are amusing, some are interesting and some are a little quirky, but they do not get in the way of the legislative process. I am pleased that the Committee is looking at that process. We need to home in on that, and not the customs and practices, which are part of the tradition of the House and should be retained. We must home in on the legislative process and bring it up to a modern standard that befits the 21st century.

8.30 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) on his maiden speech and commend him for his patience not only tonight, but for waiting for what must be a proud moment. I commend him also for his commitment to Derby, its people and its football club. I have spent many a sad hour at Reading football club watching Derby hammer my poor chaps into the ground. I hope for my hon. Friend's sake that Derby does not have to face Reading again and that Derby has a more succesful period in the premiership than Reading would have done had it beaten my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House's side, Bolton Wanderers—a fact of which she cruelly reminded me when she responded to my maiden speech.

It is good to see representatives from local government here in the House. One of the great features of the massive intake of new Labour Members—I am looking at my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey)—is that it is good to see hon. Members who have had experience of running and delivering services. The confidence that my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North showed in delivering his maiden speech shows that he is not intimidated by this large council chamber. I wish him well for the future.

It is important that new Members contribute to this important debate on the modernisation of the House of Commons and of our democracy in general. We may not bring new ideas, but we do bring a fresh approach. A Government Whip said to me not long ago that the problem with this place is that once people get into a position where they are able to change things, they do not want to because they have become accustomed to the

place and its quirks, traditions and crazy hours of working. Perhaps in five years' time I might not say what I wish to say now—which is why I want to say it now.

I am conscious that the Government Whips are anxious that we should not speak for too long as they want to go home. I have already made some points in my maiden speech. I commend the work of the Modernisation Committee, particularly on the revised Order Paper. It is wonderful to have an Order Paper that is written in English and can be understood by members of the press and the public. I am pleased that we are looking at the legislative process and I commend in particular page vi of the report, where the nine essential requirements of a reformed system are listed.

Members of the parliamentary Labour party need no reminder that, as far back as 1994, we formulated radical and definitive policies for reform of the House of Commons. It would be nice to see many of these reforms in place before the end of the Parliament. To build on the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North, as we approach the new millennium, it would be nice to think that we could drag ourselves kicking and screaming into the 20th century—that way we will be only 100 years behind the times, rather than 300.

Before senior Members misinterpret my comments, I must say that I believe that it is a tremendous privilege to serve as a Member of Parliament. We have much in our traditions of which we can be proud, but much of our procedure is ridiculous, arcane, irrelevant and disconnects us from the real world. I shall give some examples, although I do not wish to touch on points mentioned by other hon. Members. At present, large areas of the House of Commons are no-go areas for the elderly and the disabled. The current ridiculous rules prevent our having something simple like a cup of tea with constituents who come here unless we take them out on to the Terrace, where it is freezing in winter.

I welcome the fact that the Committee will look at the timetabling of business so that Members can plan their diaries more effectively. I welcome the fact that we now receive the provisional timetable for two weeks ahead, but I urge the Committee to look at planning legislation and the business of the House for three weeks ahead so we can plan constituency engagements and our time better.

I strongly support the case for a change in our working hours. I would, wouldn't I, because I am a Member from the home counties. I recognise that Members from the north, or those with business interests, may like the current system, but is it not possible for the core hours of the House of Commons to be from 11 am to 7 pm? Is it not possible for Select Committees to sit in the evening, making it easier for the public to attend and for us to plan a more sensible working day? Such an arrangement would make it possible for Members to have some element of family life, which seems taboo in this place—certainly to judge from the number of divorces.

I am at a loss to understand the value of the pairing system. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Rutherglen (Mr. McAvoy), a Government Whip, nodding; perhaps he is too. I fail to see how we can pair with an Opposition party whose numbers do not equal our majority. Perhaps the pairing system has had its day and we can look at a more radical system, such as proxy voting. If it is okay for my grandmother to have a proxy vote if she is unwell, I should have thought that it must be okay for Members of Parliament. I hope such suggestions are not heresy.

Sir Patrick Cormack: They are.

Mr. Salter: I am sure that they are to the hon. Gentleman.

In the context of a Government with a massive majority—the largest since 1832—there is a need to re-examine the role of Back Benchers. One thing I learned from my time in local government is that it is important for Administrations with large majorities to give the troops something to do. Would it be so harmful—would it threaten the Executive—if Back Benchers were allowed to gain time on the Floor of the House if, for example, they gained the support of 30 or 40 per cent. of Members of all parties for an early-day motion? I understand that that was a convention some years ago.

There should be a time limit on speeches. I am not sure that the delaying tactic used by the Opposition is particularly effective, and I am not sure what is achieved by a filibuster. I am not sure what we have to lose by time-limiting speeches and letting more Members get in. I certainly believe that Select Committees should be allowed to have at least one report of their choice debated on the Floor of the House in any 12-month period. My limited, recent experience has shown me that time should be available for private Members' legislation. Perhaps if that were the case, we would not have a problem with the forthcoming private Member's Bill to end the barbaric sport of hunting with hounds.

Since I was privileged to be elected a Member of Parliament, my opinion that the job of representing 70,000 people is a full-time job and that there is no excuse for Members to have paid employment outside has been confirmed. We are adequately paid.

I took the liberty of having a trawl through the Register of Members' Interests. The first Hamilton that I looked up is no longer a Member of Parliament, so I can mention him by name. His entry was not especially informative, but perhaps that is why he is no longer with us. The right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Sir A. Hamilton) lists seven remunerated directorships, has five remunerated employment opportunities and, like all of us, represents between 60,000 and 70,000 people. We do our constituents no service by being in thrall to two masters.

Various publications have been cited, as much that what we talk about is not new. I commend to the House a small pamphlet, "Reinventing Democracy", written about three years ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen). It is short and precise and encapsulates much of what we have said tonight and much of what the Select Committee already has in its work programme.

I believe that the Select Committee has made a tremendous start, but there is a long, long way to go before we make the changes necessary to re-establish the credibility of this mother of Parliaments in the eyes of the nation.

8.40 pm

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) on his maiden speech, which was excellent, and I am glad that

[Mr. John Cryer]

Derby County is doing so well in the league. I have supported Leeds all my life, so my life has been an echoing void in many ways.

The Select Committee's first report has dealt largely with the programming of legislation. In the Tea Room and the Lobbies I have heard the argument that the timetabling of legislation represents an attack on the rights and powers of Back Benchers. I have my doubts. Timetabling exists anyway: if memory serves, we have had two or three guillotines in this Parliament, and we had 50 or 60 in the previous Parliament. That is timetabling in a fairly haphazard way and the recommendations merely take it a few stages further.

I have grave doubts about timetabling on the Floor of the House, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) said, timetabling in Committee hands more power to Back Benchers, because there is more incentive for them to speak and the Government do not put pressure on them there not to speak or to keep their comments brief, which happens in the Chamber under Governments of whatever political complexion.

The real attacks on Back Benchers' power took place in the 12 or 14 years before 1 May 1997. That is when hours were cut and the ability of Opposition Back Benchers to keep the Government up all night was curtailed. I can think of one or two former and current Labour Back Benchers who were very good at that. People no longer speak on money resolutions, for example.

I suspect that the Conservatives, under whose aegis those powers were taken away, now regret it. Perhaps they thought that they would never be in opposition again. They certainly do not have the powers that we enjoyed for many years on the Opposition Back Benches.

The shadow Leader of the House mentioned policy pronouncements through press releases and newspaper columns. That is nothing new; policy pronouncements should be made on the Floor of the House, but there has been a slide in the other direction for the past 20 years, as I believe Madam Speaker pointed out on another occasion.

There was a great deal of talk in the previous Parliament—it has been coming back over the past few weeks—about cutting hours and making them more relevant. I do not see how we could do that, as hours have already been cut drastically. Twenty years ago, the House used to sit until 2 am or 3 am a couple of times a week. We may be glad that that does not happen any more, but it is hard to see how we could cut hours even more. How can we get 17 Bills through this Session if we cut hours? That will not work.

We must remember that in the real world people face longer hours, less pay, shorter holidays and less sick pay, yet Members of Parliament talk about working fewer hours, and last year they voted themselves a 30 per cent. pay increase. That does not go down brilliantly with people who face increasing difficulties at work.

I find it incredible that we cannot get the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill through, yet we have just been away for three months. There is a slight contradiction there. We should bear it in mind that at the most recent general election, 12 million people failed to vote, compared with 9 million at the previous one. There is increasing alienation from the democratic political process.

More and more people feel deeply cynical about what goes on here. Talk about cutting hours, lengthening holidays and raising pay will only make people feel even more that the House is irrelevant. People outside face problems that Members of Parliament, on £43,000 a year minimum, will never face, unless they are defeated, as quite a few were recently.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House mentioned alternative voting methods. I am glad to hear that there is unanimity on the Select Committee that voting will still take place here. The method of voting as it stands is pretty effective. As a new Member, I have found that it is possible to buttonhole Ministers in the Lobby, but nowhere else. Any encouragement to stay away, especially for Ministers, would be a bad thing.

Right now, the Chamber is almost empty; there is no danger of anyone getting killed in the crush to get in. When I had an Adjournment debate, the Conservative Benches were completely empty. Perhaps no Conservative Members were interested in what I had to say, although I thought that the subject, the funding and administration crisis in further education, was important. There were not many people on the Government Benches, either.

I remind hon. Members of one Colonel Sir Walter de Frece, a Conservative Member of Parliament in the 1920s and 1930s, who lived in some luxury in a palace in Monte Carlo and came to the House only twice a year, on Budget day and when Ascot was on. He had the reputation of being quite a good constituency Member, because he signed blank sheets of House of Commons notepaper and his secretary filled in the rest. Push-button voting would lead to such people raising their heads again.

I welcome some changes made since 1 May. For instance, the new Order Paper has made a great difference. It is now written in English, which is helpful. I also welcome the change in Prime Minister's Question Time. No Labour Member would accuse me of being a careerist, but I think that that has been a very beneficial change.

If the Prime Minister is under the spotlight for only a quarter of an hour, he can virtually bluff it, get out in a trice and think, "Thank Christ for that, I've got away with it." Of course, our Prime Minister never thinks that. Being under the spotlight for half an hour exposes him to far greater Opposition scrutiny, if the Opposition are up to providing it.

A radical innovation that would greatly help new Members would be the end of the Privy Council. I see no reason for prolonging its rights. Membership gives rights to some senior Back Benchers who were Ministers but not to others. New Members have to wait for hours to speak. The longest that I have waited to take part in a debate was seven hours, and I did not get called at the end of it.

I accept that there must be some process of seniority, but the Privy Council means that some senior Back Benchers who are Privy Counsellors can come in, make a quick speech and leave the Chamber, while other senior Back Benchers have to sit around with the rest of us for four, five or six hours before speaking. There is a certain inequality in that.

Two previous speakers said that there should be more co-operation in the Chamber, that we should all cuddle up together. I am dubious about that. If I had sat on the Standing Committee that considered the poll tax legislation, which was mentioned earlier, I would have said that the tax was an evil attack on the poorest and most vulnerable in society and that we should sling it out. That was what the people did out there. It was not done in here, but it was done out in the country. They slung it out. I am not going to smile on cuddling up to Conservative Members whom I have spent my life trying to get out.

My final point concerns outside interests. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) said, outside interests go down badly with people outside, who often face lower wages and longer hours. When the public see hon. Members with eight, nine or 10 directorships earning a fortune—the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), if memory serves, picked up a job on £100,000 with Barclays de Zoete Wedd—they find it obscene. It must end. Fortunately, the result on 1 May has by itself made a difference to political culture. Labour Members want to be here because they believe in public service and in restoring honour and respect to the post of Member of Parliament. Too many Conservative Members came here to line their pockets with directorships, adviserships and consultancies.

8.51 pm

Ms Jenny Jones (Wolverhampton, South-West): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) on his maiden speech.

Like other new Members, I hope that my remarks will not be considered presumptuous. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and her Committee on their work so far and on producing the report, which I have read. I found the chart at the back helpful. I also find the new Order Paper helpful, as do other hon. Members.

The Leader of the House said that she was inviting us to state our priorities. I am going to take up her invitation, although I suspect that I shall add to the long list of demands and requests for the Committee to work its way through. I gather that the Committee will in the next few weeks consider the conduct of debates. Timed speeches have been mentioned several times. I wish to refer especially to timed speeches on the Floor.

I am at pains to emphasise that I am not asking the Committee to consider timed speeches in the interest of speed. I agree with other hon. Members that speeding up legislation can be bad. Scrutiny is important. There have been examples of bad legislation that was speeded through the House with disastrous effects. As has been said, it is our electorate who must live with bad legislation. I raise timed speeches in the interest of the quality of debate.

Like other hon. Members, I come from a local authority background. As in most council chambers, we had timed speeches. Timing can vary and be quite flexible. I am not arguing for five or 10-minute speeches but for a mechanism that encourages hon. Members to be succinct and concise. The most valuable thing about timed speeches is that they enable as many people as possible to get into the debate. The way things stand, hon. Members are called by order of seniority, which we all understand, and in the interest of getting the right cross-party political mix.

I know that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and Madam Speaker work hard to try to fit us all in. I by no means I decry that, but in debates when many hon. Members want to speak, some cannot get in. By the nature of things, that tends to affect Back Benchers, especially newer Members. Apart from the frustration of hon. Members who have researched and prepared speeches that they cannot deliver, the House is the poorer for that, because it loses the practical knowledge and fresh approach that new Members in particular can bring to debates.

I had been in the House a week when a Conservative Member described me and other new Labour Members as Lobby fodder. New Members do not regard themselves as Lobby fodder. We are here to do a job of work. We are privileged to represent our constituencies. I am particularly privileged as the first Labour Member to represent my constituency. We come from a variety of backgrounds and have a lot to contribute to debates. We want to be active on the Floor as well as in Committee and in our constituencies.

The other reason why I should like the Committee to consider timed speeches is that several hon. Members have mentioned the public perception of the House and the way in which we debate. We must be sensitive to the fact that the public have a different perception of our conduct in the House and of our speeches. My constituents have told me that they perceive—I am being diplomatic—longer speeches of a meandering nature as reinforcing the unfortunate perception that Members of Parliament are merely in love with the sound of their own voices and opinions.

I said that I would be succinct and brief because I wished to raise only one point. I shall therefore end by saying that I do not decry my hon. Friends' ability to make long speeches and to stick to the point, but they must also be concise and succinct. The greatest contribution that can be made through timed speeches is to enable as many hon. Members as possible to participate in debates.

8.58 pm

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) on being the second person in the debate, which began at 4.45 this afternoon, to take less than 10 minutes to speak. I shall not name the other person because it might be embarrassing.

I welcome the report and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for all the hard work that she and her Committee have put into it. I was reassured by her comment that this was only the beginning of a process. I am sure that she is aware of the great well of support, particularly from new Labour Members, for radical change in how Parliament is run. If we are to achieve the modern Britain that we talk about, we need a modern Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) made the strongest case for that in this debate.

When many new Members came here—we were prepared for it—this place struck us as a men's club. Our hours are extraordinary. I do not argue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) suggests some of us might, for cutting our hours. We all realise that we are here to put in very long hours; otherwise, we would not have gone for this job. However, we have inherited

[Mr. Ben Bradshaw]

our hours from an age when most Members of Parliament were not paid to work here or it was their second, third or fourth job. They came here in the afternoons.

I support my hon. Friends who have made the case for introducing a system of core hours in which we start at 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning and work until 7 o'clock in the evening. That does not mean that we could not have Committees in the evenings or outside those times. Previous speakers have already mentioned the effect that our existing hours have on family life. Many of us have no family life or loved ones within easy reach of the building, but many others do. I urge them to consider the fact that most businesses that operate effectively take into account people's basic human need to see their families. When the hours of the House were set, most of the men who inhabited these seats had few, if any, family responsibilities—that was all done by servants.

The length of speeches has already been mentioned by other hon. Members. Madam Speaker is already on record as expressing her concern that the BBC is thinking of getting rid of "Yesterday in Parliament". Over the past few years, many hon. Members have expressed concern about the decreasing interest, among not just the broadcast media but the printed media, in what happens in this Chamber. That is evidence, if any were needed, that we are, by and large, a turn-off. Most of the 15-minute speeches that I have heard since arriving here on 1 May could easily have been made in five minutes. We could then have fitted in more people. I whole-heartedly support the idea of restricting the length of speeches to 10 minutes. I do not understand why they could not be a little shorter.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) on his excellent maiden speech. The fact that he was here to make it reminded me of the problem that I had making mine. The problem is shared by many new Members, who sit through hours and hours of debate, having taken a long time preparing their maiden speech, and are then not called to speak. I heard of one hon. Member to whom that happened five times, so I urge my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to consider the whole system of maiden speeches. Until a new Member makes a maiden speech, he or she is gagged. If that is not the strict rule, they at least feel gagged, because they cannot contribute to debates in the Chamber.

So far, no one has raised the issue of the dress code in the House. I do not mind wearing a suit every day, but I object to being told that I must do so. Others in the Chamber—please rule me out of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker if I am—have to sit here in diamante, buckled shoes, wearing swords and wigs. They may like that, but we should be aware of the image that we project to the world outside.

My next point is about applause. One of my abiding memories is of my first day in the Chamber for the re-election of Madam Speaker. I was sitting next to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). When the Prime Minister entered the Chamber, there was spontaneous applause from the Labour Benches. I shall not easily forget it because I received a sharp elbow in my ribs—I was one of those who were clapping—and it was made clear to me in no uncertain terms that applause was not allowed in the Chamber. Why not? Moments later, the most extraordinary animal noises were emanating from her mouth. Apparently, that was how we were supposed to express our appreciation. I do not know of any other modern Chamber in the world that does not allow polite applause.

Prayers are fine and I attend when I can, but I have to say as a high Anglican that I have not in years attended a church service where the prayers were as archaic as those we say in this Chamber at 2.30 pm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), whom I shall reveal as the other hon. Member who spoke for less than 10 minutes today, talked about the seating. I know that doing so would not be physically easy, but I do not see why we cannot change the Chamber seating into a horseshoe shape. We do not need to move the Benches: Labour Members could all sit at one end, with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the other minority parties at the other. I know that that would not allow the confrontation across the Dispatch Boxes that we have now, but is that confrontation necessarily a good thing?

If we want to move to a new politics of a more collaborative or inquisitorial nature, why are we so hooked on the system of Front-Bench spokesmen—currently my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack)—facing each other at a distance of a few feet, often shouting at each other? Even if changing the seating meant that they sat further apart, they could still have a discourse, albeit one that was less confrontational.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley also mentioned that there is not room for us all in the Chamber. As a result, we have to stand, or sit in the Gangways, or sit in the Galleries or sit on Benches where we cannot contribute to the debate. I beg my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to consider changing the seating in that respect as well.

Finally, I want to emphasise a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase made most eloquently. One of the reasons we won such a big majority on 1 May was that the British public were fed up with politics as usual. Politicians, after journalists—none of whom have bothered to stay for this debate—are held in the lowest esteem according to every opinion poll. That has much to do with the "yah-boo" nature of this place and if we do not change that, we will be unable to restore the people's confidence in the political process. The report makes a great start and I hope that we will go much further.

9.6 pm

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Rothwell): First, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to say how delighted I am that your predecessor in the Chair did not call me at a time that would have meant that I spoke before new Members who have been present for longer than I, because I have enjoyed listening to their speeches. They have been extremely helpful to me and, although I cannot say that I have agreed with everything that has been said, they have been imaginative speakers.

I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) on his maiden speech. I, too, was delighted by Derby County's play last Saturday when they appeared at Elland Road. I was not happy when they were 3-0 up, but I was very happy when, in the last

minute, Leeds won the game. Nevertheless, Derby County contributed to the most entertaining game I have seen at Elland Road for a long time.

Turning to the subject of the debate, I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. About a year ago, I heard her speak at a Charter 88 meeting in the House and many of the ideas that she talked about on that occasion are proposals that she is now seeking to put into practice through the Select Committee. I took particular note of her statement that there should be

"some kind of legislative consultation with a flexible range of options."

Although not everything that she said has come to pass, the Select Committee's report has at least been put before the House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright) said, we now have a Government who are committed to change. We also have a Leader of the House who knows how that change should be scrutinised, both in Committee and by the House. The report is a positive step and I wish my right hon. Friend every success in bringing about the changes that she envisaged a year ago. I shall comment briefly on them. I have decided to comment only on those matters that have not been done to death in the debate.

On pre-legislative scrutiny, I should say that the time that I have spent in Standing Committees has been pretty futile. I served on the Committee that considered the Bill that became the Railways Act 1993, relating to rail privatisation. That Bill, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North, was very long. Its scrutiny was conducted before our current hours were introduced, but no view expressed by the Opposition received any credence, despite the fact that we were dealing with matters of importance. They were also matters of high political controversy, so that may have been understandable, were it not for the fact that there were many points at which the Minister responsible for the Bill, and for piloting it through Committee, agreed that there was uncertainty about the detail of the way in which the Government were proceeding on certain issues.

As a result of the 1993 Act, jobs in the constituency that I then represented were lost, and a company went out of existence. There had been 130 years of railway manufacturing in Hunslet. That tradition was lost directly as a result of the Bill; that point was raised at the time, but it received scant regard. That was a failure of our system, which I hope that we shall change.

The changes that are proposed for Standing Committees are all-important, and I very much hope that they will all be put into practice.

Further discussion is needed on whether to use departmental Select Committees or to set up a specific Standing Committee to carry out pre-legislative work. The report of the Modernisation Committee is inconsistent about Select Committees and the use of departmental Select Committees. It says, or implies, that a departmental Committee would be overloaded if it involved itself in the draft scrutiny of the Bill.

Although that is arguable, it is inconsistent then to suggest that the same Select Committee might consider the Bill after it has come into effect. If a Select Committee has certain expertise, it is better for that expertise to be put to use before the Bill is further considered and before it becomes law than for it to be used to monitor the effects of the Act.

I acknowledge that we ask a great deal of our departmental Select Committees. There is a case for an ad hoc specific Standing Committee or pre-legislative Committee in which ideas can be explored.

Why is there no reference in the report to civil service back-up? Select Committees are served by Committee Clerks, not civil servants, but that is an issue which should be considered in connection with modernising the House. Traditionally, the legislative branch and the Executive branch of the Government are in the House.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) that if there is a system of push-button voting, all members of the Government—the Executive—would find that they had so many demands on their time that it would become the norm for them to push the button instead of turning up and meeting their colleagues. That voting system would isolate the Executive. Under our system, the Executive is drawn from Members of Parliament and must be involved in the normal parliamentary processes. I believe that there is value in members of the Government being physically present to vote.

Why do we not use the civil service during pre-legislative consideration of Bills? I think that the public would support that proposal. We refer to "civil servants" and "public servants", but not to "Government servants". Yet the civil service serves the Government. I believe that there is a case for introducing civil service back-up for Committees scrutinising Bills, particularly before they are sent to Standing Committees.

Two hon. Members have mentioned the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill. I suggest to the Leader of the House that the Bill should be considered for rollover. I have received more constituency correspondence on that issue than any other—and I think that my experience is common to that of other hon. Members. Many people find it hard to accept the Government's explanation that Parliament does not have time to consider that legislation. I understand the Government's position: I understand the priorities involved when dealing with the other place and I understand the passage of constitutional matters through the House. However, I think that the people are right in failing to understand why Parliament does not have time to consider a measure that enjoys enormous public support.

The reasons cannot be explained away on the basis of the time that Parliament spent in recess. I am sure that, given time, the legislation would pass through the House. Therefore, I believe that the Government should consider the Bill for rollover. In those circumstances, we would have time to debate the legislation fully and to establish a special Select Committee—perhaps comprising Members from this and the other place—to consider the issues involved.

The report lists the issues in order of priority; the second is ministerial accountability. The House is not good with legislative processes, and the Committee is right to use that as a starting point. We are also not good at holding Ministers to account. Last year, the then shadow Leader of the House referred to the format of Prime Minister's Question Time. She suggested not how many times a week Prime Minister's questions should occur, but that we might have a more intelligent Prime Minister's Question Time if many questions were known in advance. Most of us—perhaps because it is the easiest

[Mr. John Gunnell]

thing to do or because we do not want to ask closed questions—just put "E" on the questions that we table. I believe that hon. Members' conservatism in tabling questions has put a stop to the idea of conducting Prime Minister's Question Time with advance notice of the questions.

Clearly, there is a place for spontaneous questions, but we seem to be reverting to the pattern as before. Some hon. Members table questions to the Prime Minister on subjects that greatly concern them—my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) certainly does that—but, in general, we follow a pattern that has become traditional in the House. We should consider ways of ensuring that more questions are given serious thought before being answered.

The issue of parliamentary questioning should be raised by the Modernisation Committee. I commend to the Leader of the House the Public Service Select Committee report on ministerial accountability which was issued in 1996. It deals with serious issues that must be studied with great care. There was a difference between the Select Committee and the Government on whether Parliament should be able to demand the resignation of a Minister. Perhaps that question should be revisited.

The way forward for parliamentary accountability that was seen by that Select Committee has largely been accepted in principle, but we have yet to see how it works out, especially with regard to the style of parliamentary questions. We get more answers now than we got previously, but there are still times when it is easy for a Minister who does not wish to answer not to do so. I do not think that there have been any false answers, although the report suggest a procedure for dealing with answers that a Member believes are not correct.

On the issue of holding Ministers and the Executive to account, I hope that the Leader of the House will pay due attention to the work done in the previous Parliament by the Select Committee, which, by and large agreed on its findings. Where a minority view was expressed, it should be considered carefully.

I have spoken for a good deal more than 10 minutes. When the Whip spoke to me, he suggested that I finish within a quarter of an hour. I hope that I have not spoken for quite that long.

9.22 pm

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) on his maiden speech. He and I both represent Derbyshire constituencies. We fought the 1992 election together, and we were both in local government in Derbyshire, where we overlapped for four years. I am sure that we will have a partnership in the House which lasts much longer than that.

I am one of the newer Members. This week, we have heard some scepticism about the role of newer Members. In the early days, when my name was put forward for membership of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, there were some grumbles from Opposition Members about the fact that three new Members were involved. We have heard the same arguments this week about other new Members on Committees.

I like to think that those of us who are new to this place have established ourselves, and that those of us who have served on Select Committees have acquitted ourselves well. I believe that we have demonstrated that on the Standards and Privileges Committee. From the report before us, it seems that members of the Modernisation Committee have done so. Given the opportunity, I am sure that new Members will demonstrate their worth.

Against that background, I shall tell the House a short story. I was summoned by means of a card through the post to attend a meeting of a Standing Committee. I received the card on the Friday, read that it referred to a meeting during the following week and proceeded to do nothing about it at that moment. On the Monday I realised that the Standing Committee clashed with the meeting of the Select Committee of which I was a member. In my ignorance I thought that the Select Committee must come first. I was told, however, that the Standing Committee must come first.

By talking to the Whips, an intricate arrangement was arrived at whereby I would attend the meeting of the Select Committee, in a room that was in the same corridor as the room used by the Standing Committee. I was told that if there was a Division in the Standing Committee, a policeman would shout out at one door that a vote was taking place, another policeman would run down the Committee Corridor and another policeman would knock on the door of the Select Committee, summon me and take me to the of the Standing Committee room so that I might vote.

After two and a half hours in the Select Committee, I had not been called to the Standing Committee, which meant that there had not been a Division. Subsequently, I learnt that the Standing Committee had reported in 20 minutes flat. I do not know to this day what that Committee was discussing. I do not know what was said in that Committee and I do not know what the outcome was. I am not sure about the purpose of that Committee. I obviously went to the right Committee because I knew what was going on in the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges.

That story comes from my ignorance of the system, but I am still not sure what Standing Committees are for. It is clear that they can be all over in 20 minutes. They are not about the detailed inspection of legislation that is the potential of Select Committees. I am much in favour of having pre-legislative Select Committees to examine draft legislation as well as post-legislative Committees. There should be two different bodies of Committees so that Members who consider legislation that finds its way on to the statute book are not involved in considering that legislation in draft form. It is a good idea to have two different groups involved in scrutiny. In that way there would be a greater Back-Bench role.

As some hon. Members have said, the Child Support Agency is an example of legislation that was launched with the best of intentions. A major review took place during the previous Parliament and another review may yet take place. Despite that background, there is still unfairness in the system. There are inefficiencies and contradictions in the way in which the organisation operates. Those shortcomings could have been discovered by more thorough pre-legislative scrutiny, along with more effective and powerful post-legislative scrutiny. If that process had been followed, the system would have

been better for our constituents and the reputation of the agency, and its effectiveness in carrying out the job that we thought we were giving it would have been enhanced.

I receive three or four new CSA cases in my postbag every week, and other hon. Members tell me that they receive more. The majority of those cases stem from legislation that seemed all right at the time, but did not receive proper scrutiny.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) talked about the usefulness of the Lobby for tapping people on the shoulder, for example. Surely we have new technology for recording votes more efficiently, which is the metallic stripe on the back of our identity cards. I do not know why that stripe cannot be used as a swipe card to register our attendance as we pass through the Lobby.

My constituency is on the straight line between Manchester and Sheffield. That means that I can spend a couple of hours in my office on Monday morning and return by late morning on the Friday. I have the entire Friday afternoon in the constituency while the House is sitting. That seems to be a pretty good arrangement. I appreciate that Members who have more difficult travel arrangements find it impossible to achieve the same balance between work in the House and work in the constituency. I would not like to see the start and end of our working week to change that much.

As one who does not have the opportunity for family life on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays while the House is sitting, I am happy to go along with what the Whips ask me to do between Monday and Thursday, but I would rather not have to sit through the night if we can avoid it.

It has been suggested that 10-minute speeches may be too long. The Labour party conference has just agreed that to decide policy on the basis of a series of three-minute speeches is not right either, because it does not allow the scrutiny and advancement of arguments that should take place when policy decisions are made. Therefore, 10 minutes is probably about the right length for speeches in the House, but there should be the opportunity for injury time, and so on.

One of the advantages of being a Member for Derbyshire is that if we have problems about procedure we can always go to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) for an explanation. That is a useful asset. That is the thought, combined with the one that however good we think we are we can always do better, with which I shall leave the House.

9.30 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt). It has been an interesting debate. I have been thinking a lot about Jopling this evening. I was one of those who were very much in favour of the Jopling report. I urged my right hon. and hon. Friends to accept it and I voted for it. But Thursdays were different before Jopling, and the hon. Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) was right in much, although not all, of what he said. There is a lesson for us there. In seeking to reform the House, we must be careful that we do not reform the life out of it. That is crucial.

It was a pleasure to hear the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton). He paid a gracious tribute to his predecessor, Greg Knight, which was appreciated by Conservative Members. Greg Knight had a fine reputation here and, having spoken in the hon. Gentleman's constituency last week—I properly informed him that I would be so doing—I know that he had a great reputation in his constituency too. I know that the hon. Gentleman will seek to emulate him in that. I cannot wish him a long stay in the House, but I wish him an extremely happy one.

It was also good to hear the hon. Gentleman pay tribute to Phillip Whitehead, whom hon. Members from all parts of the House will remember with affection. He was a distinguished Member and is now a distinguished Member of the European Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman brings to the House a considerable experience of local government, and that was implicit in almost everything that he said. He had an essentially cautious and evolutionary approach, which I find attractive. It has much to commend it. He said that he was particularly concerned about legislation and its quality, and so should we all be. He also said that he had developed some affection for some of the traditions, even some of the more quaint ones, of the House of Commons. That, again, rather endeared him to me.

The hon. Gentleman also said that he thought the reforms to the Order Paper had been sensible, logical and helpful. No one who has spoken in the debate who has referred to the Order Paper—several hon. Members have—has had anything other than praise for it. We are very much in the debt of those Clerks who were particularly responsible for drawing up the new draft Order Papers. It is not customary to talk about the Clerks in this place, but it could not run without them. They give devoted service, many of them over many years, and the way in which they responded with alacrity to the Committee's request was commendable.

Alas, I am no longer a member of the Modernisation Committee, but I was a member throughout its discussion of this report and attended every session. I pay tribute to the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), for the exemplary manner in which she chaired our proceedings. Her approach was exceptionally fair and balanced throughout and the report is sensible and sound. I have no hesitation in commending it most warmly to the House.

The report is concerned with the legislative process. Many hon. Members have taken the opportunity, legitimately, to refer to other changes that they would like made. That is fine, but I hope that the Committee will approach each subject with deliberation. I am not saying that it should not consider all the subjects to which hon. Members have referred, but it should do so with care, thoroughness and without time constraints.

There was a time constraint on this report. The right hon. Lady promised the House that the Committee would be established and would report before the end of July. She was anxious to deliver on her promise, and every member of the Committee was anxious to assist her. The report was all the more welcome for coming just before the House rose for the recess. Hon. Members were glad about the changes to the Order Paper, and were also glad that we had done something about the voting system.

I hope that the Committee will consider further matters, particularly the voting system, carefully and in a measured way. Several hon. Members said that they valued the

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

present voting system, because it enables them to talk to Ministers and others in the Lobby. We would be much the poorer if we went electronic, especially if it cleared the Lobby.

We have heard many interesting speeches. As was to be expected, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) made a wise and perceptive speech. The House owes him a great deal for the selfless service that he has given in a variety of capacities. Since he ceased to be a Minister of the Crown, he has been a most distinguished Chairman of some key Committees. In his present role, he has massive responsibilities, and I can think of no one in whom I would have greater trust or confidence. He made some interesting comments, and he put it succinctly and perfectly when he said that the Government want to get their business through, but the Opposition need their time.

Hon. Members are realists, or ought to be. It is futile for us to suggest that we will deflect the Government from their legislative intentions. The Government have a massive majority, and unless there is the most extraordinary rebellion by Labour Members, they will get through every piece of legislation that they put before us. That places an extra responsibility on the Government to ensure that legislation is carefully thought out. The Government should be relaxed about the time that they give the House to consider legislation.

I hope that the Government will react positively to the report. The right hon. Member for Dewsbury has a double personality: she is the Chairman of the Committee and the Leader of the House, and in both of those capacities her first duty is to the House of Commons. She is also a senior member of the Executive, and wearing that hat she is as anxious as any of her ministerial colleagues to see that legislation is passed. The proof of the report will be in the right hon. Lady being able to ensure that the first part of her responsibilities at least equals the second, and it would be good if the first part could sometimes triumph over the second.

A number of hon. Members made perceptive comments about legislation. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) apologised, because he had to attend a long-standing constituency engagement. He said that better legislation requires less legislation. He also made the important point that if Lords amendments are to be properly considered, the House must give them adequate time.

Now is not the time or the place to discuss the relationship between the two Houses, or to discuss what may happen in the future; but the House of Lords—the other place—currently has a very important legislative role. It scrutinises, and it has great expertise to bring to its scrutiny. Although it cannot throw out any legislation with which the elected House wishes to proceed—which is right—it can say to us, "Think again", and sometimes when it says, "Think again", it is wise for us to think again.

In the days when the Conservative party had a massive majority, after the 1983 general election, the House of Lords performed a signal service, several times seeking to amend legislation that certainly needed to be amended. Sometimes, its amendments were taken on board and its warnings were heeded; sometimes, they were not. I believe, however, that a system that does not give adequate time for consideration of what is said in the other place is a deficient system.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) has also given a lifetime of parliamentary service, particularly in regard to procedure. His chairmanship of the Procedure Committee has been immensely distinguished: indeed, the report builds on much of what his Committee has done in the past. He made a powerful point about the disgrace of the fact that large chunks of legislation are not even debated. I have been moved to anger about that in the past. I remember walking out of one guillotine debate, although the motion had been moved by my own Government, because I was so angry about the fact that a large part of a particularly important Bill was receiving no attention. That must not happen in the future; if it does happen, we shall have wasted our time with the report. My right hon. Friend also mentioned the Chairmen's Panel—as did the hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), in a very passionate speech.

Until I was reincarnated on the Front Bench, I was the longest-serving member of the Chairmen's Panel. I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman said—as, I am sure, would you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is very important for the Chairmen's Panel to be heeded, and for its caveats to be considered carefully. We should be grateful to both my right hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

I am sorry that I missed the speeches by the hon. Members for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) and for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) while I was having a brief snack. They were the only speeches that I did miss. My right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), however, gave me copious notes about what they had said. Both have played a constructive part in the Committee's deliberations, although they have been a little over-hasty in some respects.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright)—who is not present now—made a thoughtful speech. He is my constituency neighbour, and a very good neighbour he is too. He is anxious for Parliament to regain something of its prestige, and some public esteem. He expressed a number of constructive thoughts; I did not agree with all of them, but he made some interesting comments and suggestions.

Mr. Mike Hall (Weaver Vale): It was a good speech.

Sir Patrick Cormack: It was, and it would repay close study by all hon. Members, including those who are not present this evening.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey)—another active member of the Committee—made a particularly good point when she said that the Government must not regard improvements to legislation as defeat, and that, when amendments were being considered, the Government should be open-minded. The Government should consider whether an amendment would indeed improve the Bill involved, and, if it would, they should be prepared to concede and

should not consider that a defeat. I hope that the present Government will heed what the hon. Lady said, and adopt that attitude.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman also say that it is up to the Opposition not to gloat and take it as a Government defeat when the Government accept their amendments in a constructive spirit?

Sir Patrick Cormack: That is a very good sentiment, but we are all human and we all love a bit of a gloat occasionally. It is the triumph of hope over experience if the hon. Lady thinks that she is going to banish gloating from the Palace of Westminster, but, of course, I take her point.

The hon. Member for Hornchurch is a worthy chip off the old block. Many of us in the House regard his late father with great affection. It was a terrible tragedy when he was killed and a great loss to Parliament. I disagreed with almost everything that he said, but I admired enormously his mastery of our procedures, his persistence and his use of every procedural device; he did it in a way of which Keir Hardie would have been proud. Bob Cryer was a distinguished parliamentarian and the hon. Gentleman seems cast in the same mould. He certainly does not seem to be a man who will be cowed by a Government Whip and I am delighted by that.

I agreed with everything that the hon. Gentleman said about hours, but I gently take issue with what he said about holidays. I am sure that he is as conscientious a constituency Member as his late father was. He never regarded recesses as holidays. He worked jolly hard throughout them and most of us do. That is an important point. In my 27 years in the House, I have never had more than 17 days' consecutive holiday and I do not think that I am unusual in that. It is important that we say that often.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones), who is a next-door neighbour of mine in constituency terms, made an admirably lucid and brief speech. She made some good points about timed speeches, but the essence of debate is and must be spontaneity. It is important that there should be opportunity for intervention. If one is always working against a timetable, it is impossible to have interventions. It is a great pity when Members come into the Chamber—she acknowledged this partly, but not sufficiently—read their speeches, sometimes gabbling through them, and are not prepared to give way. They plead in aid the fact that Madam Speaker has imposed a time limit and it stifles debate. I must sit down in a moment so that the Leader of the House gets her 10 minutes, but I add just this.

In the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons and in all our other deliberations, we must try to bring life back into this Chamber, which should be the cockpit of the nation. I find it infinitely depressing when Members contribute to debates—this does not apply to the hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, almost every one of whom has spoken and come back to his or her place—and then go off and do not return, as happens so often.

I wonder whether we should consider taking a leaf out of the book of the other place, so that Members can put in their names. In doing so, they know that they will be called, but are expected to be here throughout. Apart from leaving to take perhaps an urgent telephone call, to answer a call of nature or to take the briefest of snacks, they should be in this Chamber because it is absolutely destructive of proper debate if we have merely a series of spasmodic utterances, with hon. Members who have contributed then leaving. We need this Chamber to be full. The Select Committee, which is full of experienced members, should bend its collective mind to find out what it can do to encourage Members to be here more often, to take part in debates more vigorously and to stay to listen to what their colleagues have to say.

9.49 pm

Mrs. Ann Taylor: With permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I should like to say a few words in reply to the debate. I will not have as much time as the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) to deal with every contribution, but that is fine by me because, in many respects, he was replying on behalf of those of us who served on the Committee. As I said earlier, it was a constructive Committee which produced a unanimous report.

The hon. Member for South Staffordshire was right to say that we have not had what he called "spasmodic utterances" during this debate. We have had a good example today of how Parliament can work and how hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber can listen to the contributions of others and make their own points in the context of an overall constructive debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) made an extremely competent maiden speech which I am sure will please his constituents. He showed extremely good knowledge of their problems and the issues that concern them most. He ventured on to the subject of football, which is a somewhat dangerous thing to do if I am in the Chamber. In that respect, all I have in common with him is the fact that in Bolton we, too, have a new stadium. I have not visited his yet and Derby County has not yet visited Bolton. Perhaps we will see each other later in the year when we can talk about the modernisation of Parliament for 90 minutes—or perhaps not.

Today's debate has shown that the whole House basically welcomes the thrust of the recommendations in the Committee's report. Hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have emphasised different parts of the report or have suggested modifications to certain elements of what we have proposed. Some have suggested ideas that we might wish to take further forward. Basically, almost everybody who has spoken has, in one way or another, supported the ideas in the report.

In many respects, that is not surprising, because we have heard from a mixture of experienced Members and new Members. It is sometimes said that it is only new Members who want to see change in this Chamber. We have seen today that, with one or two exceptions, that is not the case. There are many hon. Members who have spent many years in the House and who do not feel that the best use has always been made of the time they have spent here. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) is showing himself to be a true moderniser by pretending to applaud instead of saying, "Hear, hear." I do not think that we should provoke Mr. Deputy Speaker too much on this occasion.

As the hon. Member for South Staffordshire said, the contribution made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) was wise and

[Mrs. Ann Taylor]

perceptive. He took an overview of the changes that are needed and managed to throw in one or two practical changes which might be achieved quite quickly if we were to take them up. He gave us food for thought in that respect.

The same is true of the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). As a former Leader of the House, he made a positive contribution to the debate and put the changes that we propose into context. He gave us hope that we could achieve a great deal in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), whom I have known for many years, is a member of the Committee. He showed his normal common sense in his approach to the debate and his usual honesty. He admitted that, on occasion, he had been party to some of the time-wasting deliberations that have had to take place in the past. After so many years in opposition, we both feel that the weapon of delay never really achieved anything. It might have caused some frustration to Ministers on a few occasions, but it never achieved anything. There was never anything constructive about it. We must try to find ways for everybody to be constructive critics, if that is what is needed. That requires a degree of willingness to listen on the part of the Government.

There will be matters on which there will be no meeting of minds, as the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) mentioned, but on other occasions—I return to debates on the Child Support Agency as an example—we do not have to be confrontational on every issue that comes up. We should not deny the fact that hon. Members on both sides of the House can on occasions agree. We should not pretend that such occasions can never occur and gear all our procedures towards that.

The right hon. Member for East Devon, who has been a member of the Committee as well as having a distinguished record as Chairman of the Procedure Committee, proved that point when he talked of Bills being passed after only a quarter or a third of their contents had been discussed. That was why he was looking for a constructive way of using timetabling, as he had said before.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) was less happy with some of the changes. Perhaps I can reassure him—not least because his last point, on which I was going to intervene, related to experiments. We are not trying to change Standing Orders in such a way that we never learn anything and lock ourselves into new procedures which may not work well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), who has also contributed a great deal to the Committee, described the expectation of a changed atmosphere in the House due to more women Members of Parliament. We would all like behaviour to improve in the House, for whatever reason. I thought that the point of order that she raised yesterday about the attitude of hon. Members to the swearing in of a new Member was totally valid. I was very pleased that Madam Speaker reinforced my hon. Friend's point.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell), who is also a member of the Committee—a new member—said that he hoped that he had punched his weight. I can assure him that he did. We found his contributions extremely useful. He said that he hoped that the Government would deliver the report. I know that he understands that we do not deliver the report. The report and the changes can be brought about only through good will and co-operation on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dr. Wright), who I understand has had to go back to his constituency, made some telling points, which put the debate into perspective. His contribution was extremely significant. It is important that we realise that, although our proposed changes are part of modernising our overall constitution, it should not be regarded as a threatening process. We should ensure that it is used constructively.

The hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) told us that he was impetuous when he was young, but that now he had settled down to using the procedures. There may have been times when his Whips thought that he was still a little impetuous, but I shall leave him to sort that out with them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), who has also contributed to the Committee's work, brought out the necessary analysis. We must lay down the principles and get them right, but we need to get the practicalities right as well. It has been useful having new members of the Committee who have understood so quickly how Parliament works but not lost their enthusiasm for change. I hope that that helps to keep us on our toes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer), who, as the hon. Member for South Staffordshire said, is following in his father's footsteps to a certain extent—I must admit that I did not always agree with his father on procedural matters either—made some valuable points about timetabling, the changes that have already happened and what we should do now to ensure that any future change is practical. I agree with him—so did the Committee—about using voting time to buttonhole and lobby Ministers. That is one of the things that we hope we do not have to lose.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones) referred to shorter speeches. We should consider the basic point of flexibility. Indeed, we might be able to take up the point made by the hon. Member for South Staffordshire about what happens in the other place, which was endorsed by my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw).

My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Rothwell (Mr. Gunnell), who is a near neighbour of mine, made some interesting points. I cannot guarantee that we are even thinking of rolling over the Wild Mammals (Hunting with Dogs) Bill, although I know that that will disappoint him. The point that he made about civil service support for Select Committees in appropriate circumstances is one which we must consider.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Mr. Levitt) has had experience of a Select Committee, and he reminded me that we need to consider the names of the Committees, because that small practical step might help the House.

I am grateful for the approach that all hon. Members who have spoken have taken, and so is the Modernisation Committee. I thank everyone who has been involved in its work. That work is a process, not an event, and it will continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the First Report of the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons: The Legislative Process (HC 190).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 17th November, the Speaker shall not later than Ten o'clock put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion on Standards and Privileges in the name of Mrs. Ann Taylor and such Questions shall include the Question on any amendment which has been selected and which may then be moved.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

Big Brothers and Big Sisters

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

10 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I wish to thank Madam Speaker for selecting this subject for the Adjournment debate tonight. The subject is described in broad terms on the Order Paper as "Government support for young people from underprivileged families", but my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will be aware that I wish to focus on one organisation that supports young people from underprivileged families. It does not yet exist in this country, but is one of the biggest charities in north America, where it has become famous for one specific service—the provision of mentors for children from one-parent families.

The organisation is called Big Brothers and Big Sisters. It has been going for 96 years in the United States of America and for 84 years in Canada. It is the Canadian organisation that has franchised its former national director to try to repeat its success in this country. The organisation has a base in my constituency and I am proud to act as its big brother on this occasion.

The organisation has already won a grant from the national lottery to help it start up and has attracted big donations from the business world. However, it knows that it is in the nature of its business that it cannot get anywhere without the active support of the Government, starting with the Department of Health. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, who has responsibility for family policy, will reply tonight. His Department is considering an application from Big Brothers and Big Sisters for a grant under section 64. I mention that only to make it clear that it is not the purpose of this Adjournment debate to lobby him about the grant, which must be decided on the same criteria as every other application. I am sure that it is not right for a Member of Parliament to try to influence the allocation of grants. My purpose is to draw attention to the work of Big Brothers and Big Sisters, which I am sure my hon. Friend will find fits in well with his approach to family policy. I also wish to ask his Department, and other Departments, to give every encouragement to the organisation.

When it is up and running, Big Brothers and Big Sisters will be able to provide mentors for children mainly, but not only, from single-parent families who approach it. The mentors will be expected to spend about five hours a week, on average, with their little brothers and sisters, but not to spend any money on them—just time.

A number of mentoring organisations already exist in this country. What is new about Big Brothers and Big Sisters is the scale of the operation. In the United States, it has had nearly 1 million volunteers and it operates through 800 affiliated agencies. When it launches in this country, it hopes to grow rapidly. The key to success is to have a sufficiently large reservoir of volunteers to provide ideal matches between big and little brothers and sisters, and to achieve economies of scale. To do that, it will need to reach a critical mass that will provide it with the advantages of scale so that it can operate cost effectively.

[Mr. Martin Linton]

Although the mentors will be volunteers, the organisation's franchise agreement requires it to employ professionally qualified and experienced personnel as local agents. It will not make any matches until and unless it has sufficient funds to do so.

We will also need a sophisticated system of screening volunteers. In the United States and Canada, there is a centralised screening system linked to police and other official records. They carry out their own local screening and home visits to all potential volunteers to create a triple lock of security. I am sure that I do not need to spell out why this is such a sensitive issue—suffice it to say that Big Brothers and Big Sisters is very aware of the importance of getting it right. Big Brothers and Big Sisters has enlisted the support of a large computer company which is willing to provide software for a screening system. It has been in touch with the Home Office, as I have, who have been helpful. We will meet the Home Office at an official level to discuss this matter.

The effectiveness of mentoring has been well demonstrated in the United States. A study by an independent research organisation, carried out at a cost of $2 million, compared 500 children placed with a big brother or a sister with 500 who were not. It showed that those placed with a mentor were 27 per cent. less likely to have used alcohol, one third less likely to have shown aggression, 46 per cent. less likely to have begun using drugs and 57 per cent. less likely to have played truant. They were more confident in their school performance and achieved better relations with their own families.

The parents who want big brothers and sisters are not necessarily underprivileged—not in an economic sense, as the title of the debate implies. They include families where the husband is absent for work reasons—including oil workers or service men. The organisation works on the premise that a parent absent for whatever reason presents problems for a child and the parent still at home. It is described as the lack of a suitable role model, but so many different functions are performed by parents and older brothers and sisters within a family, it is often difficult to predict what effect the lack of one of them will have on the children.

As an organisation, Big Brothers and Big Sisters has gone to great lengths to avoid patronising children and single parents. The image that it projects is one not of good works or charity, but of friendship and self-help. Although many of the children are from low-income families, it does not talk much about poverty. The organisation does not raise money by flag days—more likely, it raises money by Hollywood black tie events, as much of its support comes from some of the biggest names in Hollywood. President Clinton is the organisation's patron, and Hillary Clinton is its chairwoman. The organisation is required by its constitution to be totally non-religious and non-political.

Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Britain will not be a replica of the United States organisation. It is inspired by the Canadian example, but it intends to use the expertise and professionalism gained in 96 years in the United States to create a organisation in this country that is large enough to make an impact not just at a local level, but a national one.

An organisation such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters could play an important part in realising the Government's family policy in helping single parents, and in our youth justice policy. Many young offenders come from one-parent households and it is precisely the lack of role models and encouragement—an adult with whom one can talk things over—that is often the cause of young offending.

Once a young person commits an offence, he meets other young offenders and, in the absence of any alternative, those offenders become role models. Mentoring has a simple solution to the problem—give the young offenders role models who are not themselves offenders. This tackles the problem of youth crime at its very root, before it happens.

The idea of mentoring is as old as the hills. The word "mentor" comes from Greek mythology—it was the man who was a true friend to the child of Odysseus when he was away on his Odyssey. But it has equal relevance in the modern world—one could argue more relevance. Parents spend more and more time working, and sometimes more and more time watching television. The divorce rate is climbing, and fewer and fewer parents are staying at home with their children.

Mentoring provides a way of reconciling the conditions of modern life with what we all know about the importance of the family in a child's development. It depends on the dedication and selflessness of volunteers and will happen on the scale that we need only if we have a modern, cost-effective organisation such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. I hope that my hon. Friend will tell us that the Government will give that organisation and others like it all the help that they can.

10.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): The House owes my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Mr. Linton) a debt of gratitude for raising this important issue: the future of our young people and the need to ensure that those who are underprivileged, for whatever reason, get the best possible start in life. We must mobilise the whole community to ensure that they do.

Young people are our future and we cannot afford to have them neglected. The Government put a premium on our youth. We recognise the role of voluntary organisations in partnership with the Government, both nationally and locally, in ensuring that young people get the best possible start.

My hon. Friend has drawn on his considerable experience in addressing the issue and mentioned the contribution of Big Brothers and Big Sisters, which has developed, through befriending and mentoring in the United States and Canada, what has proved to be a very effective model of harnessing and mobilising community resources in support of the young. The Government very much welcome the fact that my hon. Friend has drawn its success to the attention of the House. We believe that it has a role to play in advancing our national agenda on the matter.

Young people thrive best when raised by loving parents living in stable relationships. Indeed, when parents are together and have an effective partnership, they are most likely to be able to provide for young people a context in which it is possible for them to grow, thrive and prosper. We must recognise that for a variety of reasons it is not always possible for that to be the case. My hon. Friend, in his excellent speech, gave several examples of why that

may be. He is right to point out that a child is not necessarily underprivileged simply through the lack of wealth or the absence of material benefits. A young person may be underprivileged as a result of the absence of a father out working anti-social hours, or the absence of a father from the domestic scene altogether.

Young men benefit especially from a male role model. Some of the worst examples of bad and anti-social behaviour by young people arise when they have been brought up without a stable and responsible male role model. We, as men, have a responsibility to be there for our children. We have an especial responsibility to be there for our sons. We would all want, as men, to be responsible fathers.

Where, for whatever reason, a stable and responsible figure is not present in a young person's life, there is certainly a role for mentoring and befriending projects such as those outlined by my hon. Friend and provided by Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

The organisation does not work solely with young men, but it has found, in developing its role in the United States and Canada, that it is young men to whom it has to devote most attention. All too often, it is the contribution of young men to anti-social behaviour that has to be addressed. In the United States, Big Brothers and Big Sisters and other such schemes have been subject to rigorous evaluation that has shown that educational outcomes are much better when such organisations are involved.

Mentoring and befriending organisations have an important role to play in the project that the Prime Minister has got under way with the establishment of a unit in No. 10 to tackle social exclusion. That is why we give this organisation a particularly warm welcome for its potential to contribute to the battle against social exclusion. Of course, we must recognise that if social exclusion is to be effectively addressed, it will require more than simple mentoring and befriending. As a society, we must tackle a range of issues, not least the inequalities that bedevil society. We must ensure that we are effectively moving our citizens from dependence and being without work into being self-sufficient and self-supporting, with all the self-respect that comes from getting back into the world of work.

It is important that we recognise that the battle against poverty, which is contained in the move towards the creation of jobs and training opportunities, is part of the project, as is the need to address inequalities in housing and education. In all those areas, there is an important role for voluntary effort. There is a need to ensure that the whole community is mobilised around the project. It is important to recognise across the Government the need to ensure that housing, education, employment and health services work effectively together. That has to be mirrored by partnerships between local authorities and the voluntary sector, and between health and local authorities, all focused on delivering to families and children and recognising the essential role of families and family life in building a nation.

At our party conference in Brighton this year, the Prime Minister said:

"we cannot say we want a strong community and secure society when we ignore its very foundation: family life."

Mentoring and befriending have a role to play in that contribution to building strong, successful families. We recognise that and are determined to ensure that mentoring and befriending play their proper part as we develop and take forward a programme of work designed to support and enhance family life and to combat social exclusion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea rightly drew attention to the importance to Big Brothers and Big Sisters of the voluntary effort of citizens drawn to offer their services out of a desire to improve and enhance their community. He rightly drew attention to the importance of ensuring that those who volunteer do so out of the best of motives and have no ulterior motive. It is a sad reflection on the times in which we live that it is necessary, particularly in relation to children, to take the utmost care to ensure that those who volunteer to make such a contribution do so because they genuinely care about children, not because they want to abuse or exploit them in some way.

Mr. Linton: Will my hon. Friend assure the House that the Department of Health will work closely with the Home Office on screening, as envisaged in the Police Act 1964? The resources will then be found to enable organisations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters to undertake the enormous job of screening the many thousands—potentially eventually tens or hundreds of thousands—of volunteers. They must be vigorously screened, not only through police records but through all available records, before such organisations can confidently use them for mentoring much younger children.

Mr. Boateng: We are working closely with the Home Office and other interested agencies to ensure that we develop a framework of appropriate protocols and legislation to put in place the necessary safeguards to ensure that young children's interests and welfare are protected. I am delighted to learn that Big Brothers and Big Sisters will seek advice and assistance from the Home Office in that regard.

When encouraging mentoring and befriending, we must ensure that organisations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters which, through voluntary effort, have the potential to do much good, gain access to the pool of talent, expertise and wisdom that exists among our fellow citizens who are looking for ways to help. We are lucky to live in a time when people, once again, have discovered the will to care. As a result of the tragic events in the life of our nation in recent weeks and months surrounding the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, we have seen a great upsurge in the spirit of caring, concern and commitment to the well being of others. This is therefore a propitious time for an organisation such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters to begin its activities in this country.

Of course, the organisation is by no means alone: already we have throughout the country excellent examples of the tradition of volunteering in support of children and young people. One thinks of Home-Start, which mobilises the commitment and experience of successful older parents who are prepared to range themselves alongside others who, for one reason or another, feel in need of support in parenting.

These are excellent organisations doing good work, but there are other individuals and groups working through other organisations in support of young people. We all know those individuals in our constituencies and it is

[Mr. Boateng]

always good, as Members of Parliament, to be able to do what we can to support them in their work. Big Brothers and Big Sisters will provide yet another opportunity for people to give of their time and energy at a time in our nation's history when their work is much needed.

Studies suggest that mentoring, of itself, is not to be seen as a substitute for quality social services, education and employment programmes. That is why we as a Government see it as but one strand of an overall and overarching programme across Government designed to support and sustain children and young people. It is, nevertheless, an important part and, in welcoming my hon. Friend's initiation of tonight's debate, let me tell him that I am happy to be able to announce that the Department of Health is to second a member of staff to Big Brothers and Big Sisters and contribute up to £10,000 towards that person's salary to show our support for the work of Big Brothers and Big Sisters and to ensure that best practice is followed in the screening process my hon. Friend mentioned.

We also believe that it is vital that we learn from Big Brothers and Big Sisters to see how best the experience gained in the United States and Canada can be utilised, not only through that organisation's operation in this country, but throughout the voluntary sector. Big Brothers and Big Sisters has considerable experience not only of mobilising voluntary activity in the community, but of gaining access to funding and to expertise that would be of value to the voluntary sector generally.

Volunteering and the voluntary sector play an important part in the development of successful community-led initiatives. They are the cement of thriving civic societies. They enable us to make the early interventions in the life of children and young people that are the most cost-effective way of ensuring that they go on to prosper, grow and overcome the risks and problems that all too often threaten some of our most underprivileged young people in hard-pressed communities. We believe that that will pay huge dividends in the struggle to create safe and secure communities and that it will bolster up that which we are seeking to achieve in terms of the criminal justice system. We believe that it will make our families strong so that they may be successful and provide the building blocks of a strong and successful nation as we move into the new millennium.

The House owes my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea a debt of gratitude for raising this issue. We will work to carry forward the interests of children and young people.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 14 November 1997

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Policing of London

[Relevant document: The report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis 1996–97 .]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

9.34 am

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): It is a great honour for me to address the House for the first time on policing in London in my capacity as Home Secretary and as police authority for the Metropolitan police. I grew up in suburban Essex, just within the boundaries of the Metropolitan area, and have for years lived down the road in Lambeth, so I am very familiar with how London is policed. In my first few months as Home Secretary, I met the Commissioner on several occasions, accompanied police officers on patrol in Brixton on two occasions, addressed the annual open meeting of the Metropolitan Police Federation and launched the firearms amnesty in Lambeth.

Last week, I had the sad duty of attending the funeral of Police Constable Nina Mackay, who paid the ultimate price for trying to make London safer for the rest of us. Nina Mackay died following a stabbing in Stratford last month. I am sure that I speak for the whole House and for all Londoners in saying that we all salute her courage and dedication. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] The price that Nina Mackay paid reminds us all of the courage and dedication of every police officer who performs his or her duties every day of the year.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): We all utterly share the sentiments expressed by the Home Secretary. Does he agree that the whole problem of police trying to protect our security is dramatically illustrated in the annual report that he has before him, which shows that last year 12,000 officers were injured while on duty? That means that a Metropolitan police officer is likely to be injured once every three years. Does not that illustrate the danger to which we subject our police in trying to protect our capital?

Mr. Straw: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is right. I should clarify the fact that the 12,000 figure is the total number of injuries—I shall come to that later in my speech—but some 3,000 officers are injured each year as a result of assaults and, of those, about 1,800 have to take time off duty. Even those figures illustrate the danger that police officers face. Sometimes police officers in the Metropolitan police area, as elsewhere, suffer the most horrific injuries, yet, despite those injuries, they return to active duty.

The Metropolitan police requires strong leadership to command respect and discharge its responsibilities. I am confident that in the present Commissioner and his senior management team the police service in London has that leadership, and I place on the record my thanks to, and confidence in, the current Commissioner.

This is the first policing of London debate since February 1996, when the Metropolitan police's performance for 1994-95 was debated. Although the Home Secretary is the police authority for London and an annual report should form the focus of debate each year, during the previous Parliament the House had the opportunity to debate policing in London only three rather than five times. The reason for that absence of debate is clear: the previous Government were profoundly embarrassed by the lack of practical support that they gave the Metropolitan police. Despite their rhetoric, far from ensuring that the Metropolitan police was equipped to serve Londoners effectively, the previous Administration oversaw a fall in the number of police officers in London of 1,300—from a peak of nearly 28,500 in 1991 to just under 27,200 at the end of April 1997. Police officer numbers may not be the best measure of policing, but it was the measure which the previous Government chose to use and, on that measure, their record on policing in London was a significant failure.

Policing is a substantial public spending programme involving more than £7,000 million this year, over 20 per cent. of which was spent on the Metropolitan police.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North–West Cambridgeshire): The Home Secretary might have mentioned the thousands of extra police in London since the Conservative Government came to power in 1979, but we can debate that. In his report, the Commissioner links a decrease in police numbers last year with two factors: the London formula and the Police and Firemen's Pensions Act 1997. Do I take it, from the Home Secretary's criticism of the previous Government, that he will change the London formula and the way of paying police pensions, in order to give more comfort to the Commissioner?

Mr. Straw: I shall make some general remarks about resources for London later, but let me answer the right hon. Gentleman's specific questions. There has been continuing examination of the formula for London. When I announce the police grant in about a month, that formula may better reflect the needs of London policing than it did in the past.

The right hon. Gentleman also asked about pensions. I appreciate that he did not do the Home Secretary's job when in government, but the previous Administration sat on a major review of police and fire service pensions, because they found the issue too embarrassing. I promise the right hon. Gentleman that that report will surface in due course. I look forward to his support and that of his right hon. and hon. Friends for the difficult decisions that will have to be taken in respect of the police and fire service pension arrangements.

The demands that are made of the police service are well demonstrated by the Commissioner's annual report, but we are faced, through what we have inherited from the previous Government, with a tight public expenditure round this year and a tight round for next year. Pressures are great, and difficult decisions are required to ensure that our priorities are properly resourced.

[Mr. Straw]

In addition to the difficulties that the police service in London has faced over the police grant, the Metropolitan police have been left with barely adequate levels of reserves as a result of the previous Government's funding decisions.

As police authority for London, I have been having a series of discussions with the Commissioner about the Metropolitan police service's budget for 1998–99. I want to ensure that the Commissioner has adequate resources for effective policing in London. No final decisions have been taken on next year's funding allocations. The provisional settlement for the Met will be announced along with that for other police authorities in the next few weeks.

Resources are limited, and the police service, like other parts of the public service, cannot be immune to that reality. The quest for efficiency improvements must be relentless. In my discussions with the Commissioner about his budget, I have pressed him to continue to increase efficiency and effectiveness throughout the Metropolitan police service. I am pleased to say that he is already making significant strides in that regard.

Mr. Keith Hill (Streatham): Does my right hon. Friend accept my assurance that his repeated visits to Brixton, which I represent in part, are greatly appreciated by the local police, local voluntary agencies and the local public? Will he join me in applauding the success of the Lambeth guns amnesty that he launched two weeks ago? It has already yielded nine weapons and a considerable amount of ammunition.

Does my right hon. Friend accept that areas such as Brixton and Streatham require constant high levels of policing? It has been a cause for anxiety that in recent years there have been regular cuts in front-line policing. I am somewhat reassured by the message of potential optimism in his remarks about the forthcoming budget announcement, but will he look particularly at resource allocation in the No. 5 south-west area, the Metropolitan police division that includes Streatham and Brixton, where it is felt that the formula has worked to the disadvantage of front-line policing?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his compliments. I was wondering what was coming next, and I was not disappointed. Of course I shall take full account of the pressures on resources and the needs of No. 5 police area, along with Nos. 4, 3, 2 and 1 police areas.

The Government must be sure that all public spending programmes are in line with our priorities and objectives. That is a key purpose of the Government's comprehensive spending review. The study of value for money in the police—which is taking place as part of the review—provides us with an opportunity to take a wider perspective on value-for-money issues. We are looking at value for money not just in terms of buying goods and services at the best price, but in terms of measuring performance against objectives, and getting away from a focus on inputs towards a concentration on the outputs of the police service.

Let me make it clear that while I am Home Secretary and police authority for the Metropolitan police, I am determined that the House will be able to debate the policing of London every year. However, I hope to be able to relinquish that post and pass it on to representatives of the people of London.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I explain how it came about that the Home Secretary took on the position of police authority in 1829. In that year, Robert Peel raised a new kind of standing body almost overnight and in a capital city where the largest organ of local authority at the time, apart from the City corporation, had been the parish vestry. We all know that after some early difficulties, the Metropolitan police service became a success and the model for forces internationally, as well as in this country. However, the Metropolitan Police Act 1829 did not of itself ensure that the new institution would be a success.

That Act did not rationalise the policing of London, as is sometimes supposed. Indeed, in a sense it confused it further by dealing only with the parish police and leaving the rest of the police services in London intact. Thus, the City became an island in the Metropolitan sea—and remains so today; the Thames police remained aloof, and so did the horse patrol and constables attached to police offices set up under the Middlesex and Surrey Justices Act 1792. Conflicting and partial jurisdiction was a problem from the start.

Peel, it appears, had first proposed a board of three magistrates to run the new force. However, in the end the Act set up two magistrates at the head of the force and a third official, the receiver, to be responsible for accounting and supplies. The role of the Home Secretary was to have overall political responsibility, the power to appoint—through the Crown—the top three officials and an ability to direct—to some degree—the actions of the magistrates.

In 1829, the following arrangements were in place: two magistrates, who quickly became known as Commissioners, were responsible for operations; the receiver, who was accountable for resources; and the Home Secretary, who was answerable to Parliament.

Through that arrangement, the Home Secretary became police authority for the Met and remains so to this day. In our view, however, that is not a satisfactory situation. Policing in London, as elsewhere, is primarily a local service. We want a police authority that can be properly accountable to Londoners and take full account of the wishes of Londoners. The Commissioner, I am pleased to say, shares that view.

We want to modernise the present arrangements and bring them into line with those of areas outside London, where police authorities made up of a majority of elected members have been in place for some time. Therefore, as part of our plans for a strategic London authority, we are proposing a new police authority for London.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): The right hon. Gentleman will, of course, realise that the Metropolitan police district extends a long way beyond the proposed Greater London authority boundaries and includes Broxbourne, Elmbridge, Epping Forest, Epsom and Ewell, Hertsmere, Reigate, Banstead and Spelthorne. That is a considerable expansion of the area. As he is probably well aware, it is proposed that the new police committee will have a representative from those districts. Does he think, however, that that is a correct balance?

After all, it is a significant expansion of the Metropolitan area and, with one representative, it would seem to be a little out of kilter.

Mr. Straw: I do indeed know that the Metropolitan police area stretches far into the suburban home counties, because I was brought up in Epping Forest within that area, even though that part of Epping Forest has always proudly remained part of Essex for all other purposes.

We propose a police authority of 21 members, and it is proportionate to have one representative from the outer areas. The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), met representatives from the outer areas this week and, I understand, had satisfactory discussions with them. We remain open to representations about the exact balance of elected members. However, as we have found in other areas—for example, in the Thames Valley, which combines three counties—there are always pressures to increase the total number of members. That desire must be balanced against the need to create a body that is small enough to work efficiently and effectively.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): Will the Home Secretary contrast his proposal to offer the outer London districts representation on the authority with the current arrangements whereby, at best, outer London district representatives receive half an hour with the Home Secretary perhaps once a year?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend puts it better than I. I am grateful to my hon. Friends for anticipating large parts of my speech and for phrasing their remarks more elegantly than I ever could. My hon. Friend is exactly right.

As with police authorities outside London, the majority of members will be elected and will come from the Greater London assembly, with the exception of the representative from outside the Metropolitan area. The other members will be magistrates and independents, and will be selected in similar proportions to those in other police authorities.

Today's debate is a vivid reminder that the Metropolitan police force is different: London policing has many special features. The Met has some unique responsibilities and an international reputation in many areas—and that may require some unique approaches and solutions. We are committed to ensuring that any new structure will preserve the Met's ability to continue that work while maintaining its fine record of achievements.

In 1979–80, I introduced two Bills on the accountability of the police. In the second Bill, I proposed a mainly elected police authority for London, recognising that there would have to be special arrangements to cover the national and capital functions of the police that would continue to involve the Home Secretary to a greater degree than applies to police services outside London. I am pleased to say that the overall idea of a police authority for London was picked up at one stage by the previous Government.

On 23 March 1993, the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), told the House that the Government's police reform programme would include creating a new police authority for the Metropolitan police in line with the new national pattern. Like so many policies of the previous Administration, that lasted only a brief time before it was reversed. Indeed, the policy lasted fewer than 100 days before the then new Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), told the House that the Home Secretary—which, by strange chance, was him—would remain the police authority for London.

Having reached that position, the previous Government then created the Metropolitan police committee, which was appointed to advise the Home Secretary on his role as police authority. We were critical of those arrangements in opposition, and we are committed to changing them now. However, it would not be in the interests of the people of London simply to abolish the committee and leave me as police authority for the Met with no independent advice until a proper police authority is established.

I met the Metropolitan police committee recently, and I am impressed by the way in which it is carrying out its task. In advance of the proposed change to a police authority for London—and, of course, subject to the outcome of next year's referendum on a London authority—we plan to introduce transitional arrangements for the Metropolitan police committee to combine existing members with what would effectively be a shadow police authority for the following two years.

Ms Margaret Hodge (Barking): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and I am grateful for his remarks about transitional arrangements, which I hope will be an improvement. Will those transitional arrangements ensure more openness in the deliberations of the Metropolitan police committee so that there can be some accountability to Londoners regarding what is discussed and what advice the committee gives to the Home Secretary?

Mr. Straw: I want to see the committee operating more openly. I stress that there is no suggestion from committee members or from the chairman, Sir John Quinton, that they would want to do it any other way. I am happy to pursue that suggestion further with my hon. Friend.

I turn now to the performance of the Metropolitan police in 1996–97, which is the focus of the debate. The report shows that the Met achieved its targets for robbery in that year, with a detection rate of 19 per cent. for street crimes and 24 per cent. for robberies of business properties. As a result of Operation Eagle Eye, the rising trend of street robbery has been stemmed. To bring hon. Members up to date, in the year to March 1997, the number of burglaries in the Metropolitan police area fell by more than 5 per cent., and a detection rate of 22 per cent. was achieved. Operation Bumblebee—conducted London wide since June 1993—continues to impact on burglary in the capital.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): A fear of crime has emerged on the streets of Beckenham in the past week or so in terms of burglary and street crime. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give the people of Beckenham on that score?

Mr. Straw: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that, despite the success of the Metropolitan police, crime and the fear of crime remain very high in London and elsewhere. The simple explanation is that, as a result of

[Mr. Straw]

the previous Administration's record, we have higher levels of burglary, robbery and car crime than any of the 14 western countries included in a recent international crime victimisation survey.

We must not only back Metropolitan police efforts in Beckenham and elsewhere, but put our community safety proposals on to the statute book very quickly. They are designed to ensure that local authorities and the police can work together much more effectively—as in the London borough of Bromley—to secure safety on the streets and in people's homes.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the considerable initiatives undertaken in Croydon involving the local authority and the local police force? They have combined to reduce the level of crime significantly and to increase the level of detection. Will he comment on the relationship between increasing police effectiveness and resources? There is a slight concern that, where local authorities and police work very well together to reduce crime, the net result may be a reduction in the number of police officers: if the level of crime is reduced in an area, the resources are switched to areas with a higher propensity for crime. How is my right hon. Friend confronting that difficult issue?

Mr. Straw: I know a good deal about what has happened in Croydon, where there has been a long-standing excellent partnership between police and local authorities. Our policies will build on successful activities throughout the country and strengthen the relationship between police and local authorities.

The question of police deployment in any police area is ultimately a matter for the chief officer. That is entirely right. An area should not be penalised for its success in reducing crime. On the other hand, if an area has been successful and the threat of crime has been reduced, it is appropriate that officers should be moved to other areas in order to follow a similar recipe for success there.

The police operation Crackdown on Drugs has also been successful. The campaign was launched in May 1996, with the aim of getting drug dealers off our streets and educating young people against using drugs. As a result of the campaign, the number of drug trafficking offences detected in London increased by 26 per cent.—nearly three times the target—and the number of drug possession offences detected rose by 6 per cent.

It is right that the Metropolitan police should direct resources to the key areas of concern: robbery, burglary and drugs. However, there is no doubt that people also seek the reassurance of a visible police presence alongside an intelligence-led policing policy. The Metropolitan police have continued to ensure that uniformed operational constables spend significant time on such visible duties. The public also look to the police to provide a high standard of emergency service. The Met now answers 90 per cent. of 999 calls within 15 seconds, despite an increase of more than 5 per cent. in the number of calls received.

I could not talk about policing in London without referring to the work undertaken by the capital's police officers in combating the threat to London from terrorism—work which continues today. As the House well knows, we face terrorist threats from many quarters—international as well as domestic. We owe a great deal to the police for their vigilance and commitment. I am happy to pay particular tribute today to officers who deal with anti-terrorist measures.

It is a testament to the Metropolitan police service that it was able to cope so magnificently with the two biggest public events in the country within a matter of weeks. It had only days to organise policing of the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, one of the largest public events in living memory. A huge and largely unseen effort went into making that event safe and orderly. That was only a few weeks after its successful policing of the Notting Hill carnival.

The Government and I pay tribute—to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman)—to the men and women of the Metropolitan police, to all the officers and civilian staff, but especially the 3,000 injured as a result of being assaulted on duty. I remain very concerned about the high level of such injuries—with 1,800 officers forced to take sick leave as a result of injuries sustained on duty.

One thing that makes policing different from almost any other civilian job is that police officers face the ever-present danger of harm against them caused not accidentally but quite deliberately by those with whom they are trying to deal. That danger exists wherever and whenever police officers carry out their duties. There can be little doubt that there are particular dangers and pressures in policing the metropolis. Quantifying the difference is difficult, but it is there. I am struck, when talking to police officers in forces outside London, who may have served in the Met, how often they refer to that difference.

Wherever officers serve, we have to ensure that they are given proper protection against physical harm. The recent killing of Nina Mackay tragically reminded us of the dangers that police officers have to confront. That should have brought home to everyone the importance of giving officers the best possible protection. I share the Commissioner's determination to ensure that his officers are indeed properly protected. Since January 1997, a total of nearly 18,500 Metvests—the Met's protective body armour, have been issued.

The recent inquest into the death of Mr. Ibrahima Sey raised issues about the use CS spray by the police. I know that before CS spray was chosen, the police service looked very carefully at expert advice and at the result of a six-month operational trial. After the inquest, I read all the pathologists' reports and other medical and toxicological evidence that was submitted to it. There was nothing in the evidence to suggest that CS or the solvent MIBK, separately or in combination, present any significant threat to human health. I was—and remain—satisfied that there was no reason to suspend the use of CS spray. I strongly support the use of this equipment, which I believe is helping to protect the lives of police officers as they go about their duties.

I also strongly support—to pick up a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill)—the Commissioner's proposal, which was built on a local request, for a local firearms amnesty, which is now in progress in Lambeth. This is the first occasion on which a local amnesty has been held. My hon. Friend said that I had launched it. I should explain that I simply had a

walk-on part for the launch, which was undertaken by someone much more distinguished than I could ever aim to be—the England and Arsenal striker Ian Wright. On the basis that my enemy's enemy is my friend, I commend Arsenal on their amazing victory at the weekend. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] That seems to have the unanimous support of the whole House.

The amnesty demonstrates that all communities are willing to say to criminal elements, "Stop! We are not prepared to accept this kind of behaviour. We demand a safer community." The number of firearms in Lambeth handed in has reached 12. That is 12 fewer weapons with which the police and the public may be threatened.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I am grateful for the Home Secretary's considered and comprehensive review of the issues in London. We all support the idea that the Met should have the powers that they need to do their job. I ask him to consider one further extension of powers, which they tell me that they do not have and which impedes them greatly.

When a young man was murdered in my constituency in August, a gang of young men were brought in for questioning. Those young men were bailed to reappear for an identity parade. Between their bailing and their reappearance, they had all substantially changed their identity. The police believe that they should have the power to require that people's appearance is the same when they come back as when they were bailed, and that it should be a criminal offence not to comply with that. I believe that many unresolved serious crimes, including murder, would be dealt with better if such a power were introduced.

I shall be grateful if the Home Secretary will look at that issue as a matter of great priority and give officers the power that they say they need.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. The Commissioner has not personally raised that matter with me, but the hon. Gentleman raises a very important issue about improving the detection of crime. I shall certainly consider it. I shall write to him and place a copy of the letter in the House.

There are many other respects—alongside the backing that Lambeth has given the police—in which the community is already involved in maintaining law and order. I should like to take this opportunity to thank all the volunteers who give up their time to help the Metropolitan police, in particular the 1,600 officers of the Metropolitan special constabulary, the lay visitors who attend and monitor police stations, and members of the police consultative groups, which play an important role in making London policing properly responsive, as do those involved in neighbourhood watch schemes.

In July, I announced the establishment of a full judicial inquiry to look at matters arising from the death of Stephen Lawrence. That inquiry, under the chairmanship of the senior, retired judge, Sir William Macpherson of Cluny, held its first preliminary hearing in October and will begin the main phase of public hearings early next year. It is the first inquiry appointed by any Home Secretary under the Police Act 1964 for more than 16 years. It was, therefore, a decision which I did not take lightly.

When I met the Lawrence family, I was deeply moved and impressed by their determination and courage. They made a strong case for the establishment of an inquiry. The chairman of the Metropolitan Police Federation subsequently supported their case. I believe that the inquiry, under the Police Act powers, will allow the concerns of the Lawrence family and the police service about this case fully to be addressed. I want the inquiry to look forward as well as back. For that reason, I set the terms of reference as follows:

"particularly to identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes."

The purpose is not just to find out what went wrong, although that is an important part of it. I believe that there will be lessons to be learned for the community and the police in racially mixed areas, and lessons to be learned more generally about relations between minority ethnic communities and the police.

Britain is a multiracial and multicultural society, and the Metropolitan police area is the most racially mixed area in the country. There should be trust and confidence between all sections of the community and the police. That is why I gave my personal backing last month to the launch of a major thematic report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary which sets out a blueprint for improving policy community relations and for tackling racism. The Metropolitan police have a key role in putting that report into practice. I expect them to do so.

The report confirmed that local communities want to see vigorous action by the police to challenge racist, criminal and anti-social behaviour. It also confirmed the need for the police to receive the active support of the black and Asian communities. This is a two-way, not a one-way, street.

It is generally accepted that the current system for dealing with officers who fall short of what is expected of them is not satisfactory. Police staff associations have been working with the Home Office to design better procedures. Others have echoed Sir Paul Condon's concerns about his powers to deal with rogue officers. This is a difficult area, in which the need for robust and speedy discipline procedures must be balanced with fairness to officers, who are unusually vulnerable to malicious allegations.

The Home Affairs Committee decided in July this year to inquire into police discipline and complaints. It is taking evidence from a range of interested groups and individuals, including the Commissioner. I expect its report around Christmas and await it with interest.

I note—turning to another matter of police personnel policy—that some officers within the force are unhappy with the career development policy for the Met, usually referred to as "tenure". I understand the reasons for that unhappiness, but I also understand that, for effective policing in London, it is crucial that the Metropolitan police service has the right mix of experience and specialist knowledge in police stations. The key is to get the balance right and I have confidence that the Commissioner will do that, balancing the needs of individual officers, local divisions and London as a whole.

The Metropolitan police service is playing an active role in developing and increasing the use of new technologies in the fight against crime. Many details have been given in the Commissioner's annual report and there is no reason for me to repeat them. I merely say that the establishment of the new DNA database, on which I commend the previous Administration and the police service, is producing dramatic new results. One third of

[Mr. Straw]

the DNA tests that are taking place within the Metropolitan police service are leading to positive identification. It is an extraordinary and gratifying result.

I shall make some concluding remarks about our overall approach to community safety and youth crime and the changes that we propose to introduce. We shall introduce a crime and disorder Bill to ensure that the police are equipped, along with local authorities, with better and more effective powers to tackle crime reduction and disorder in their areas.

When it comes to specific crimes, it is right that the police service should target such offences as robbery, burglary and drug dealing. We know, however, that many people drift into those crimes through disorder, through their loutish behaviour, which is often difficult to check by means of specific public order legislation. Such behaviour is not being effectively checked by the community as a whole with the backing of the police. I have in mind, for example, graffiti and criminal damage. Those involved drift into disorder and drift further into crime. Too often, regrettably, they get the idea that they can get away with their activities. They then graduate into serious and specific crime.

I am often asked why so many people are in prison. There are many reasons for that, the principal one being that many people commit crimes. Almost every adult in prison began his or her life of crime when a youngster. It is in a sense a testament to the failure of the youth justice system that we allow young people, certainly until they are 15, to get away with the idea that they can commit crime after crime and suffer no serious sanction. Against that background, we should not be surprised if, at the age of 17 or 18, they have graduated into serious crime and need to be incarcerated for quite a long time.

We intend to change things and bring about significant root-and-branch reforms to the youth justice system to ensure that offending is nipped in the bud. We shall ensure that there is active intervention that confronts offending behaviour. If necessary, youngsters who do not get the message may have to be taken into custody for a period. We intend also to ensure that the police and local authorities are given proper powers through community safety orders to deal with criminal anti-social behaviour so that the police and the community do not have to go through the frustration of seeking specific convictions for low-level public order offences, which are often difficult to prove.

We can build on the work of some local authorities, including the pioneering work of Southwark and Coventry. We intend to give the police and local authorities the right to go to the magistrates court to seek restraining injunctions on the civil burden of evidence, not least because the victims of offending behaviour will not be victims twice over by having to go through the process of going to court and suffering that indignity or pressure, or being intimidated into silence. Such orders are designed to get round the intimidation that bullies currently administer to prevent the detection of their crimes.

There are many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House who wish to take part in the debate. That being so, I shall bring my remarks to a close. I am in no doubt—

Mr. Geraint Davies: As for combating youth crime, is my right hon. Friend aware that in Croydon the police take a tough approach on the possession of knives—there is no caution, simply charging? Secondly, is my right hon. Friend sympathetic to the idea that I am pursuing of having certain roads in the centre of a town closed to youths who go around holding glasses or bottles of beer, or who stand outside pubs with glasses or bottles, thereby intimidating shoppers?

Mr. Straw: I support that idea. There are already powers for local authorities to introduce byelaws banning on-street drinking. They have been successfully introduced in Coventry and Liverpool. There have been no enforcement problems and the public order situation has been changed.

We shall abolish the present system of cautions and replace it with a single final warning, which will trigger intervention. The most important feature in dealing with youngsters is consistency, not harshness. We must face youngsters with the consequence of their actions. It is one thing to administer a warning to a youngster following a minor offence, but it is better to cover that warning with a further warning that if he does it again there will be not another warning but serious action. Offending behaviour is reinforced if there is a belief that the system never does what it is empowered to do.

For the second time, I shall attempt to conclude my remarks. I am in no doubt that there is unanimous support in the House and across London for the work of the Commissioner and his staff, both uniformed and civilian. They work to make London a safer place. As we approach the new millennium, new policing issues will inevitably arise. Criminals attack local communities as well as crossing international borders. That is why the Metropolitan police will continue to police locally, consulting local people, as well as playing a major role in tackling national and international crime.

The Commissioner is determined that the Metropolitan police are able to do that job as effectively as possible within an ethical framework by, as he says, the right people doing the right things in the right way. Spending constraints will inevitably force the Metropolitan police and the rest of the police service critically to examine all their activities to ensure that they deliver value-for-money policing that broadly meets the demands of the service.

I look forward to listening to the debate, which provides the House with a real opportunity for Members representing London constituencies to explore issues that are at the heart of the public's concerns and are rightly central to the Government's plans to make this country a safer place.

10.18 am

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North-West Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the Home Secretary, first on becoming the police authority for London and, secondly, on his ingenuity. I wondered how the right hon. Gentleman would avoid having to dwell on his party's abysmal record in opposition over the past few years when it vigorously opposed and voted against many laws that now, as Home Secretary, the right hon. Gentleman will want to see applied to the benefit of the public. Even I did not think that he would have the ingenuity to go back to 1829. I greatly enjoyed his historical review.

I do not intend to speak about the racial aspects of crime in London, but I appreciate, as did my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and

Hythe (Mr. Howard), the former Home Secretary, the support the right hon. Gentleman gave us to combat racism and racist crime in London and the rest of the country. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will follow that bipartisan tradition on racially motivated or related crime.

Like the Home Secretary, I believe that it is right at the beginning of our first debate on policing in London in this Parliament to recognise the huge debt that we owe to the Metropolitan police. We should recognise the courage, professionalism and good humour with which its officers carry out their responsibilities. We should always be conscious of the risks that they run on our behalf. I join the Home Secretary in paying tribute to Police Constable Nina Mackay, who made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. She was the 16th Metropolitan police officer in 20 years to forfeit her life on behalf of the public. It is right that the House should recognise and place on record our appreciation of that commitment.

The Commissioner's report records that 11 members of the force received the Queen's commendation for bravery. I offer our congratulations to Constables Neil Allan, David Barton, Paul Davies, Robert Dean, Antony Diver, David Hall, Derek Hooper, Andrew Keyte, Adrian Mabbott, Carl Ritchie and Deborah Wright for what they did on our behalf.

The 12 names I have mentioned highlight the risk that is attached to this public service. As the Home Secretary said, 3,280 officers were assaulted or injured on duty during the year. What is worrying to us all is that the number has increased—from 3,097 in 1995–96.

Like the Home Secretary, I welcome all moves by the Commissioner that are designed to improve the protection and safety of his officers. I was particularly heartened by the fact that the Home Secretary took time to examine the coroner's report and came to the conclusion that CS gas is an acceptable means of officer protection, thus endorsing his predecessor's decision. I am pleased, as no doubt he is, that appropriate training is being given to officers in the use of CS gas and the Metvest. Officers deserve the best protection available.

The jobs that carry an element of risk are only part of the service. When in difficulty, the first instinct of hon. Members and those whom we represent is to turn to the police for help. The report shows that initial contact is overwhelmingly by telephone. A total of 11.5 million 999 calls, operator calls and direct calls were made to the police in the Metropolitan area last year, of which almost 10 million fell within the charter standard. I say that with some satisfaction, because when the previous Government were developing the concept of quality and trying to quantify standards by which quality could be assessed there was a good deal of vigorous debate about whether they would have any meaning. Their significance is now clearly underlined in the Commissioner's report.

I welcome the aspect of the report that deals with the quality of service to the public. There has been a 28 per cent. increase in the number of thank-you letters that the Metropolitan police have received from the public. We live in a cynical society which more frequently than any of us are comfortable with tends to focus on the negative. The old song said that we should accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative: it could be said of our country as we approach the new millennium that we have got it almost exactly the other way round.

Mr. Straw: Things can only get better.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: That is another new Labour commitment. It is a promise and we shall judge them accordingly in the next four years.

I have said on many occasions in a variety of places that as a society we do not say thank you often enough, either in public or in private. I am pleased that a few more people in the Metropolitan area wanted to say thank you, and I join the Home Secretary in saying thank you to the Commissioner and to all those who work with him.

The fact that people believe that they get a good service from the police is important in its own right, but it is important for another reason: it helps to encourage partnership. I noticed how frequently the Commissioner referred to partnership in his report.

First, the Commissioner referred to partnership with the general public. The Home Secretary and I had the privilege of attending a Crimestoppers function earlier this week: its line is 0800 555 111. That partnership enables the public to have confidence that the police will act on the information that they give and it has made a significant contribution to policing in the capital. The Commissioner and the Home Secretary paid tribute to Crimestoppers. I did not have the opportunity on that occasion to do so, and rightly so, but I now pay tribute to Michael Ashcroft and all those who help him to run that significant and beneficial operation.

The very next day, I heard on Capital Radio an advertisement for Operation Eagle Eye, whose slogan is "Grassed up, banged up". That shows the Metropolitan police's determination to get to grips with street robbery. It is not a partisan initiative: it was launched under the previous Government and is supported by the new and different Government, who have a common commitment to making it possible for the public to feel that they have a role to play, as they did with the Rat on a Rat initiative, and with Rat-Trap, which encouraged people to give information on drug-related crime.

Those initiatives are important. As a former security Minister in Northern Ireland, I have some personal knowledge and I am conscious of the contribution that the public can make. Many people have information about crime and we must devise ways to enable them to make it available so that the police can take action.

Secondly, there has been partnership with various organisations such as the British Transport police to co-ordinate activities inside and outside railway and tube stations. That co-ordinated approach makes it more difficult for criminals to get away with their crimes. There is also much better co-ordination at football authorities. I endorse what the Home Secretary said about two major events. He could also have referred to Euro 96, for which the policing was of a standard that attracted considerable commendation in this country and beyond. The Home Secretary and I share an enjoyment of football, so we regularly observe the policing of football matches. He made generous comments about Arsenal, and rightly so. I see excellent policing at Highbury and at Peterborough, as he does at Blackburn. I take some satisfaction from

[Sir Brian Mawhinney]

that, not only because Peterborough is at the top of its division, but because Arsenal is above Blackburn in the premiership.

Mr. Straw: By one point.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I think that Churchill had something to say about the number one. I make a serious point about the contribution of good policing at sporting events.

Thirdly, there has been partnership with local authorities. I have noticed that the police and local authorities have put in place better arrangements to control activities at nightclubs, and crime levels have gone down as a consequence.

Fourthly, there has been liaison between the Metropolitan police and British Telecom on the nuisance and distaste caused by prostitutes advertising in public telephone boxes. The leader of Westminster council sent me examples of such advertising. I have been in the House long enough to know that it is sensible to put these cards in an envelope, for I do not intend to be seen on camera with them. When I pass them to the Home Secretary, he will not open the envelope in front of the television cameras either. I am making a serious point, and I ask the Home Secretary to look again at this issue. If further legislation is needed, the crime and disorder Bill might provide a suitable vehicle. Rather than throw the cards across the Table, I shall make them available to the right hon. Gentleman at the end of the debate.

Mr. Straw: I am standing up not to receive the cards but merely to thank the right hon. Gentleman for making these points. I was concerned about this matter in opposition and it was raised with me by members of Westminster city council. I will certainly take up his suggestion and respond in due course.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I am grateful to the Home Secretary and I know that Westminster city council will also be grateful.

Perhaps the best example of partnership in London and other parts of the country has been the partnership between the police, local authorities and the private sector in the provision of closed circuit television. I shall give the House a few examples: Brentford, Heston, Feltham, Bedfont and Hounslow all have CCTV, won from the challenge, covering their sheltered housing schemes.

I shall put together another group—a review of London. Hounslow, Richmond, Wembley, Camden, Croydon, Ealing, Hammersmith, Wood Green, Feltham, Elephant and Castle, Deptford, Lewisham, Catford, Wimbledon, Morden, Stratford, East Ham, Ilford, Kingston, Barking, Bexleyheath, Southall, Streatham, Canning Town, Uxbridge, Walthamstow and Harrow all have town centre CCTV coverage.

Pimlico, Westminster community, Northolt primary, John Chilton special, Walford high, St. Matthias, Gayton high, Nower hill high, Cedars nursery, first and middle, Mellow lane, Heston community and junior, Hounslow town primary, St. Mark's catholic, Holland park, St. Thomas's, St. Mary's, St. Francis Cumberland, Eastlea, Sarah Bonnell, Whitton and Sir James Barrie—all schools—have benefited from the partnership, and from Government money, in the provision of CCTV. Charing Cross and Hammersmith hospitals have also benefited.

What has come from this Government? Nothing. Not a penny. *[Interruption.]* I find the smiles of Labour Members interesting. They have benefited from the previous Government's commitment to partnership, but they are not looking to their Front Bench with any expectation. They are Labour Members, but the people they represent are looking for cover. Their constituents are looking for security and a decrease in street crime—for the reassurance associated with cameras. Thus far, they are looking to the Government in vain.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, in Croydon, a significant amount of money came from the local authority and the private sector in an initiative pioneered by that partnership? The previous Government did provide additional money, but such partnerships have been pioneered in the past by Labour authorities. There is obviously a commitment on the part of the Government to continue that work.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: There is obviously not a commitment on the part of the Government to continue the work. I will be the first to congratulate the Government on yet another U-turn if they ever get round to identifying some money, as the Minister of State has hinted. If he makes such an announcement, the House will recognise, first, that the Government are doing what they should do and, secondly, that they are doing it under pressure and without the commitment that characterised the last Government.

The hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies) did not listen to what I said. I said that CCTV was perhaps the best example of partnership between the Government, local authorities and the private sector. That is true in Croydon. It is true all over the country. It was the last Government who made that contribution, unlike this Government.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): Having been corrected on this matter once already, the right hon. Gentleman should have done his research. He should apologise for the fact that his predecessor grossly overspent the budget for the current year and the allocations made before the general election, and made no allocation whatsoever in budget lines for the future. Promises at a general election are easy for a Government who know they are going to lose power.

Mr. Ottaway: Is that it?

Sir Brian Mawhinney: Yes, and it is the third time the Minister has said that at the Dispatch Box. Looking at the record of the last Government—which I have, in part, given to the House—one must choose between a Government who put their money where their mouth was throughout the country and a Government who will make no commitment even to the principle of continuing CCTV, much less to the provision of money for it. I have no doubt which side the public would choose.

Mr. Straw: The spending plans we are following were laid down by the Government of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member. Is he proposing that we increase the overall spending totals he endorsed?

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I am happy to tell the House that I have no responsibility for funding decisions by the

Government. I had some responsibility for, and pride in, the previous Government's actions in making available CCTV with all its benefits for London and the rest of the country. This Government will not even make that commitment.

Ms Hodge: The right hon. Gentleman said that the previous Government put their money where their mouth was. Will he explain—perhaps apologise, or at least justify—why, last year, budgetary pressures created by the Government of which he was a member led to a decrease in the number of police constables in London by 240 when the previous Prime Minister had promised 5,000 extra bobbies on the beat across the country?

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I encourage the hon. Lady to go to the Library and ask for the paper that covers expenditure on policing in England and Wales.

Mr. Michael: What about police numbers?

Sir Brian Mawhinney: If the Minister does not mind, I shall answer his hon. Friend's question and then give way to him. If the hon. Lady goes to the Library for that information, she will see that there has been a real-terms increase of about 70 to 75 per cent. in expenditure on policing in England and Wales. She will see a second line on the graph, which runs above the England and Wales figures except for one year in 18. It shows the expenditure in London, which is higher than the average expenditure in England and Wales.

Mr. Michael: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will do what he promised and answer the question my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge) asked. She asked about police numbers; the test that the last Government set for themselves—and failed.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I thought the Minister would have understood the Home Secretary when he reaffirmed to the House what he was told by the previous Home Secretary—that the disbursement of resources is the responsibility of the chief officer in each force. In that context, I asked the Home Secretary whether that meant that he was to change the London formula or the pensions bill—two important issues identified by the Commissioner. We received an equivocal answer from the Home Secretary.

The Government have talked about partnership in the context of community safety. The Home Secretary said that there was a partnership between the Government and local authorities. I should like to quote from a Home Office consultative document entitled, "Getting to Grips with Crime: A New Framework for Local Action". In it, the Home Secretary states:

"The citizens of this country should not have to put up with the high levels of crime and insecurity which we have seen in recent years, and in many areas they are already seeing the benefits of voluntary collaboration between the police service, local authorities and other local agencies in partnerships to reduce crime. The Government wants to build on this excellent work by providing a new legislative framework to ensure that the contribution of all the key partners to the prevention and reduction of crime is maximised, and to ensure that local people are given every opportunity to contribute to the process."

I thank the Home Secretary for stating that there is much voluntary co-operation and that it is working well. To use his words, it is "excellent work". However, I did not understand the non sequitur that followed—that there would be a quantitative or, I think he implied, a qualitative improvement if legislation were introduced. I should like to examine that issue.

In an accompanying document, the Home Secretary refers to an example in Wandsworth where in 1992 a formal partnership between the council and the Metropolitan police was launched to attack problems such as burglary, graffiti and safety at stations. He states:

"In 1994 the Watchlink Unit was formed and assumed responsibility for neighbourhood watch support and development in the Earlsfield and Tooting areas."

I shall not take an undue amount of time to refer to the whole programme. That voluntary partnership did not require legislation. It came about because the local authority and the police recognised the problem and came together to address it.

In the same document, the Home Secretary refers to the Abbey partnership policing initiative involving the London borough of Merton in partnership with the Metropolitan police and other key local organisations. One of the projects there is the Merton Alleygater scheme to combat domestic burglary by installing security gates across alleys between houses. Hon. Members can read the document for themselves.

Those are two examples of voluntary schemes in London that are praised by the Home Secretary. I know that the size of the document was limited, but in it he might have referred to the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea which, with the police, produced a community safety action plan in 1995 which included a borough-wide strategy for CCTV in public places. A council-police partnership board was established in 1995 and the Home Secretary can find out more about that from the borough. In the document he could have referred to the London borough of Bromley in which, based on co-operation between the Metropolitan police and the borough, the pilot Bromley town centre CCTV scheme led to reductions of 40 per cent. in non-residential burglary; 40 per cent. in vehicle-related crime and 70 per cent. in criminal damage. The council, which I believe is Conservative controlled, agreed to extend the system to Orpington and Beckenham town centres. My point to the Home Secretary—

Mr. Straw: We know the point.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I intend to be much more subtle, but I am grateful to the Home Secretary for being my straight man. My point is serious. The right hon. Gentleman's document makes it clear that at all levels the Metropolitan police want to enter partnership schemes. The Home Secretary tells us that 90 per cent. of local authorities recognise community safety as an area of work that is relevant to theft. He says that two thirds are already engaged in independent, multi-agency partnerships and two thirds undertook local crime pattern analysis.

In view of that background, I was surprised to read the Home Secretary's other comment in his consultation document. He states:

"It costs nothing for a local authority to make crime one of the many factors which is routinely considered when, say, new policies for the delivery of social services are planned,".

Later in the document, he states that in order to set the attitudinal framework within which such co-operation can take place he intends to legislate. I ask him to think again.

[Sir Brian Mawhinney]

I have spoken about partnership so that he will not accuse me or any other Opposition Member of being against partnership. My point is different. It is that if there are excellent examples—I think that I am right in saying that there are more than 300—of co-operation between local authorities and police in which each is motivated to work with the other for the common good, what leads him to believe that the process is likely to be enhanced by legislation? Experience teaches us that it is more likely to be enhanced by encouragement, the spread of good practice, guidelines and politicians in all parts of the House throwing their weight behind the development of what has already taken place. We are not debating theory: we are discussing the fact that more than 300 first-class schemes are already in place.

If the Home Secretary insists on taking the legislative route, he is likely to expose himself to a charge which for him would be unjustified although I do not think it would be unjustified in relation to the Government. It is that his intentions are driven more by the desire of Labour councillors for more power than by a desire for better policing in local areas. It is well known that Labour councillors reacted badly when the independent police authorities were set up. We are in danger of seeing a pay-off, resulting from the Home Secretary's legislation, of the old Labour instincts of centralisation, bureaucracy and demarcation which characterise Labour-controlled town halls throughout Britain.

Mr. Straw: I shall put the right hon. Gentleman right before he digs himself in deeper. The Crime and Disorder Bill implements a central recommendation by the Morgan committee on partnerships against crime—and that committee was established by the previous Administration. If old Labour has anything to say about the matter, its criticism might be that we are implementing a recommendation that was made to the Conservative Administration. The right hon. Gentleman is completely off beam. The purpose of putting the duty of crime partnerships into law is to impose obligations on local authorities that are not working effectively with police forces. There are a few such authorities and in some areas police divisions are not working effectively with local authorities. The legislation will not make much difference to the best, but it will make a huge difference to local authorities that are not performing well.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: I understand that that is the Home Secretary's objective and I am aware of the Morgan report of 1991. Perhaps I know more about the matter than the right hon. Gentleman gives me credit for. My point is about what has happened in the interim. Because we encouraged it, voluntary development has proceeded apace. I am unimpressed by the Home Secretary's argument that, through legislation, he will be able to force Labour councillors to do what by instinct they are not prepared to do now on behalf of those who elected them. They will create a bureaucratic nightmare. We shall return to this matter throughout this Parliament.

Mr. McDonnell: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Brian Mawhinney: No, because there is to be a statement at 11 o'clock and I must finish before it.

I should like to comment on three of the Metropolitan police's objectives. First, I welcome the decrease in burglary—the figures are back to the 1989 level, although they are still too high. If the Home Secretary wants to be seen to be serious in his commitment to reduce burglary figures further, he has a simple way of going about it. He can give effect to existing legislation. Mandatory minimum sentences for repeat burglars would offer great encouragement to the people of London.

Secondly, I welcome the 26 per cent. increase in the detection of illegal production of, supply of and intent to supply controlled drugs. Drugs lie at the heart of too much crime and anything that the Government can do—I recognise that it is limited—particularly to create an environment that enables that menace, which destroys lives, families and communities, to be dealt with, will command widespread support in the House.

I commend to the Home Secretary taking time to return to the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where the first substance misuse task force in the country was set up voluntarily by the local authority and the police. The health information project in the north of the borough is supported by the council and police and provides voluntary sector input to the drugs referral scheme operated by the police. One of the good news aspects of the Commissioner's report is the increasing effectiveness of partnership. I do not want that to be put at risk. So much that is good and properly motivated is already in place.

Thirdly, 61 per cent. of constable time is spent on the beat. It is a cross-party view that people are reassured by the sight of a policeman or policewoman on the beat. Indeed, the comment, "You can never find a policeman when you want one" is an inverted compliment to the police as it shows that that is where we always start to look for help, so I commend the Commissioner for meeting that objective. I and, no doubt, other hon. Members hope that he will set an even higher objective for next year and meet that too.

I heard what the Home Secretary said about resources. I understand his problem in terms of the budget. Indeed, it must be uncomfortable for him to share his Home Office responsibilities with the Chancellor of the Exchequer as it is the Chancellor, a sort of Home Secretary manqué, who is refusing to allow the Home Secretary to introduce mandatory minimum sentences for burglars and is encouraging him to take over the power of the courts and to tag prisoners and release them early.

We introduced tagging, and support it in the terms that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, the previous Home Secretary, set out, but if the Home Secretary takes to himself powers that have traditionally been exercised only by the courts, he is going to get himself and the Government into serious difficulty as the public will understand that he and the Chancellor set more store by money than by policing and public protection.

If I were the Home Secretary, I would be suitably aggrieved at the Chancellor because his handling of the economy in the past six months has added 1 per cent. to inflation and I am sure that the Home Secretary knows that 1 per cent. added to inflation represents £17.5 million for the Metropolitan police budget. We do not have to have a big debate about resources. We will settle just for

the fact that, through inflation alone, the Home Secretary and the Chancellor have robbed the Metropolitan police of £17.5 million next year.

The Labour party's manifesto for London says:

"Labour fully supports the Metropolitan Police in their fight against crime . . . Those who assault and rob should be caught and punished".

But we are not going to have mandatory minimum sentences for burglars and I understand that we are going to let people out of prison early. I then read:

"many people in London don't feel safe when they are out".

But there is no CCTV commitment from the Government to do anything about it. Then I read:

"Labour boroughs have been at the forefront of partnerships against crime".

I look at the list of voluntary initiatives and do not see any reassurance to the public.

After six months, we can assess this Government's attitude to law and order. There is no extra money—indeed there is a decrease in money—there is a policy on burglary that, were it not so dangerous, might be viewed as frivolous, and there is no commitment to taking the fundamental steps, which the people of London want taken, to decrease crime and increase reassurance. The promise was that Labour would be tough on crime. It joins other promises that have been broken. Conservative Members will be the ones who will fight for the people of London.

10.57 am

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for his commitment to the policing of London and particularly to my borough of Lambeth. I know that it was mentioned earlier, but it is important to point out that he chose to continue to live in my constituency, which people there genuinely thought was a good thing. I also pay tribute to him for the fact that, shortly after he became Home Secretary, he twice spent time with the police in Lambeth, not for publicity reasons and with cameras around, but to go around at night, and to find out what it was really like to be a police officer in one of the most difficult policing areas. He knows what it is like to live and to walk the streets in an area where people fear crime. The people of London should be delighted that we have a Home Secretary who understands and appreciates the difficulties of policing in boroughs such as mine.

In welcoming the debate, which takes place every year—I know that it has been slightly more than a year since the previous one—I want to take stock of where we are and, in particular, to pay tribute to the work of the Metropolitan police throughout London, especially in my borough. We can be proud of the service. It is continuing to change, which it needs to do to serve the needs of London's diverse communities.

I am pleased that relations between the police, the community and my local authority continue to improve. A great deal of constructive work has been done over the past year or so. The community police consultative group continues to prosper—and I say that in the historical context of Lambeth not having had good relations with the police. The group is now under the chairmanship of Mike Franklin. He stepped naturally into the shoes of Nicholas Long, who chaired the group so well and for so long. Mike Franklin is very well respected and everyone is convinced that he will be a great leader for community-police relations in my borough. The future for the group looks very bright.

It being Eleven o'clock, MADAM SPEAKER *interrupted the proceedings, pursuant to Standing Order No. 11 (Friday Sittings).*

Iraq

11 am

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent events in Iraq.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Dr. John Reid): Saddam Hussein is continuing to defy the clearly expressed will of the United Nations and the international community by refusing to allow the UN Special Commission—UNSCOM—to carry out weapons inspections and, now, by expelling UN personnel.

It is essential for that region and for the rest of the world that UNSCOM should be allowed to carry out its work. We know that Saddam Hussein still has the capacity to produce weapons of mass destruction. UNSCOM is crucial to ensuring that they are all destroyed.

It is clear that Saddam Hussein has misjudged the will of the United Nations. Security Council unanimity was once more demonstrated yesterday in a further presidential statement. The British Government are determined to stand firm against Saddam Hussein. We know that he is a dictator who has demonstrated a total lack of interest in the welfare of his own Iraqi people. He has shown by his past actions and history that he is a threat to regional peace and security.

The Government are consulting closely with other members of the Security Council to explore to the full diplomatic means of resolving the situation. The Foreign Secretary met the US Secretary of State, Mrs. Albright, in Edinburgh this morning to discuss the position. We remain hopeful that Saddam Hussein will realise that co-operation with UNSCOM is the only way for Iraq to progress towards a lifting of sanctions.

As a sensible precautionary measure, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence yesterday decided to move HMS Invincible from the Caribbean to the Mediterranean. Today, he has decided to reduce the notice to move of Harrier GR7 attack aircraft from 1 Squadron from five days to 48 hours, effective from Monday. I stress that it is a sensible precautionary measure. No decision has been taken to deploy Harriers or to move Invincible to the Gulf. We continue to support diplomatic measures and we trust that there will be a sensible response from Saddam Hussein.

Mr. Howard: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. I assure him and the House that the Government will continue to have the Opposition's full support for the position that they have taken.

Will the Minister confirm that it is the United Nations and the world community, not the United States, who are being defied by the Iraqi dictatorship and that what is at stake is access by one of the world's most evil regimes to weapons of mass destruction? While we all hope that it may still be possible to resolve this crisis by diplomatic means, will the hon. Gentleman confirm that force has not been ruled out? Will he further confirm that Security Council resolution 687 provides sufficient authority for military action to be taken if necessary, without any further resolution by the Security Council?

Finally, what can the hon. Gentleman tell the House about the readiness of the United Kingdom to play its part in enforcing the Security Council resolution?

Dr. Reid: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I confirm his comments on Saddam Hussein's defiance, not of any individual country, but, through the United Nations, of the whole international community. The right hon. and learned Gentleman correctly pointed to the evil nature of the Iraqi regime. We do not need to study the books or the crystal ball to know that—it is in our historical experience. I agree with him about the nature of the threat resulting from the expelling of UNSCOM. It is not a formal United Nations presence in Iraq; it is a vital instrument in maintaining a careful watch over, and probing further into, the holding of terrible weapons—biological, chemical and other—of potential mass destruction.

I assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we are doing everything to achieve and support a diplomatic solution. This morning, the Foreign Secretary agreed with Mrs. Albright the need for a diplomatic solution. Therefore, I stress that the carrier move and the Harrier move, of which I have just informed the House, are sensible precautionary measures within the context of the Government's support for a diplomatic solution.

Force is not ruled out, of course. We are not ruling out any options, including military, but we hope for a diplomatic solution. We have acted throughout within the ambit and on the express will and legitimacy of the previous UN resolutions. It is absolutely essential for purposes not only of legality, but of international morality and the widest possible political support that we do that. I assure the right hon. and learned Gentleman that we will continue to do that.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Are any other members of the Gulf war coalition, apart from the United States and ourselves, taking similar sensible precautionary measures?

Dr. Reid: I cannot give my hon. Friend details of what other measures are being taken. I assume that our colleagues—especially permanent members of the Security Council—are involved at all levels in our efforts, primarily public and diplomatic. However, I hope and expect that sensible measures, other than diplomatic, are being taken by all those who wish to be prepared for every and any contingency.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Will the Minister accept at least my congratulations on the fact that the lessons we learned about dictators more than 60 years ago have not been forgotten by the Government in the way that they seem to have been mislaid by some of our allies?

Dr. Reid: We would wish to stress at the moment the unanimity with which our allies are approaching the matter. We all come from different experiences and individual national positions. Thus far, there has been unanimity. We wish to ensure that any future action has the widest political support, whether on a diplomatic or any other basis.

As I said in answer to the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), we have always operated within the ambit and on the basis

of the UN resolutions. Perhaps I should make it clearer than I did previously that those resolutions already validate the use of force under such circumstances.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): May I thank the Minister for coming to the House and assure him that all that he has said this morning has the complete support of the Liberal Democrats? It is imperative that UNSCOM be allowed to continue its work because it has already regularly found stockpiles of the sort of hugely dangerous weapons of war and destruction that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. We know that the Iraqi Government have used chemical and biological weapons as part of their dictatorship apparatus and activity, and are therefore able to use them again. The UN needs to be supported and it is quite right that our forces and warships are put at its disposal so that it may be back in operation in Iraq, rooting out those weapons, at the earliest opportunity.

Dr. Reid: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the points that he makes. He reinforces the point—of which I think the British people will and should be aware—that it is not a matter of some formal imposition as a result of abstract United Nations resolutions. UNSCOM's work and the measures taken by the United Nations are absolutely vital if we are to ensure that weapons of mass destruction with terrible, terrible consequences are, first, identified and, secondly, disposed of.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that it is worrying that more than two weeks have elapsed since the Iraqis' decision to withdraw their co-operation with US UNSCOM personnel. It is clear that Iraq has moved weapons of mass destruction and equipment during that period, making UNSCOM's task that much more difficult when it resumes its activities. Even one or two weeks can make a dreadful difference in such circumstances.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) for highlighting that point and for the support shown by him and by the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe. They have expressed not only to the British people but to Saddam Hussein the fact that we are committed—first through diplomatic and every other measure that we can employ—to ensuring that those weapons of mass destruction never again threaten either the region or any other part of the world.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my hon. Friend agree that if the narrowly based coalition decides to attack Iraq, the chances of hitting the tyrant Saddam are very small, but that the chances of inflicting death on innocent people, women and kids in Iraq are very high? I note his desire to continue with some form of diplomacy, but will he consider another possibility? When United Nations forces have been sent to other areas on previous occasions, it has sometimes been specified that certain countries should not send component parts of that force. Everyone agrees that one of the problems behind the latest decision by Saddam was that there were too many Americans in the inspection team. Before people are slaughtered, would it not be a good idea to call his bluff, and to consider the proposition that there are other countries in the world that could provide component parts of the inspection team? That is diplomacy. Perhaps it will resolve the issue without killing innocent people.

Dr. Reid: I say with great respect to my hon. Friend that others might not regard as diplomacy giving Saddam Hussein a veto in dictating to the rest of the world how to implement resolutions. It might just be interpreted as appeasement, and we certainly do not want to go down that path.

Iraq's decision to expel United States personnel on 13 November is unacceptable. The Security Council—not a narrow coalition, but the entire Security Council—is united in its opposition to that act. The decision to proceed with the expulsion of United States personnel was a further attempt by Saddam Hussein—as demonstrated in the presidential statement of that day—to face the united opposition of the entire United Nations Security Council.

I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) that we are in the vanguard of pushing for diplomatic and political solutions to the problem. We will not, however, rule out any measures that may be necessary to implement the will of the international community. We certainly cannot start from the basis that diplomacy means giving Saddam Hussein a veto over the views of the rest of the world.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): In commending my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) for tabling the private notice question, and the Minister for his answer, may I ask the hon. Gentleman to agree that Saddam Hussein is an evil man who is a threat to the peace and stability of the middle east region and a potential threat to the peace and stability of the world? Does he agree that, as long as Saddam Hussein has the capability of manufacturing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, he will remain a threat? Moreover, does he agree that the only reason that economic sanctions have been imposed on Iraq is that Saddam Hussein has not taken the measures necessary for them to be withdrawn, to bring succour and help to the Iraqi people?

Dr. Reid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. As for the nature of the regime, by his deeds shall ye know him. No words that I can use could illustrate the situation more amply than the actions of Saddam Hussein himself. He has not only inflicted evil on his neighbours and presented a threat to the international community, but he has inflicted evil on the Iraqi people themselves—including the marsh arabs—and used gas and chemical weapons on Kurds in northern Iraq. He remains a threat not only to his neighbours but to the stability of the entire region. The weapons that comprise that threat are horrible indeed. They are potentially weapons of widespread mass destruction.

I stress again that we are committed to ensuring that every diplomatic and political avenue is travelled to meet the will of the international community, and to ensuring that Saddam Hussein remains fully compliant with UNSCOM and Security Council resolutions. The bottom line is that we cannot allow Saddam Hussein to dictate to the international community the terms on which a settlement will be resumed.

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): In view of the cataclysmic dangers that we may now face as we

[Mr. John McDonnell]

step down a path possibly to military action, may I ask my hon. Friend to liaise with the Leader of the House to ensure—through you, Madam Speaker—that, early next week, we have an emergency debate on the implications of recent developments and the potential for regional war, which may break out because of military action?

Dr. Reid: We wish to ensure that both sides of the House are involved in continuing discussions. On my hon. Friend's specific question, such a debate will, of course, depend on events. I stress again that—as outlined in this morning's discussions between my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and Mrs. Albright—we are intent on finding a diplomatic solution to the situation. Therefore, it is too early to respond directly to such a request. We wish to ensure the widest possible support for some form of international diplomatic solution—commensurate with maintenance of the will of the United Nations and previous resolutions, which have had widespread, indeed unanimous, support.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): May I press the Minister further on a point raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) in his original question, on the issue of resolution 687? Does the Minister agree that the resolution is enough in the current and unfolding circumstances?

Dr. Reid: I think that I have already answered that question; the answer is yes.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has placed the matter before the House. Although the types of military preparations that have been taken by the Government are right and proper, and justified under resolution 687, does he agree that it is far more important that the diplomatic solution is enforced? More weapons have been discovered and destroyed since UNSCOM began its work than were destroyed in all military operations during the Gulf war. Does that not show exactly why we should be seeking a diplomatic solution?

Dr. Reid: Yes, indeed. I agree that a diplomatic solution is better from everyone's point of view: first, because of the assistance that the resulting period of stability provides to allow the identification and destruction of weapons of mass destruction and to ensure that they will never be deployed in anger, and secondly, because it avoids the potentially cataclysmic effects of any other measures that have to be used. That is why I stress that we are committed to finding a diplomatic solution to the problem. That has been reiterated this morning in the discussions between the US Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

I am grateful for the opportunity to stress that point so that we can place in context the deployment of HMS Invincible, which was announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, and his decision to prepare to deploy the Harriers. HMS Invincible is being deployed, not to the Gulf, but to the Mediterranean. I welcome the opportunity to assure the House that it is a sensible, precautionary measure in the context of our continuing commitment to find a diplomatic solution to a problem created not by us, or the international community, but by the President of Iraq.

Policing of London

Question again proposed, That this House do now adjourn.

11.20 am

Kate Hoey: I was talking about the bright future of the Lambeth community police consultative committee and my confidence in the leadership of Michael Franklin.

I want to mention a few of the initiatives taking place in my borough and how Lambeth is in many ways taking a lead in the diversity of operational policing. Many of the initiatives are designed to ensure that the old vicious circle of suspicion, mistrust and entrenchment remains broken. Trust does not come overnight, and everyone in Lambeth is very aware of how just one badly handled incident can set back relations so quickly. There is a need for enormous sensitivity in dealing with some of the incidents in my area.

On 4 March this year, the four Lambeth police operational command units—Brixton, Streatham, Vauxhall and south-west operations—launched something called policing diversity in Lambeth. It is a community and race relations strategy set up in response to the Metropolitan police's corporate strategy, the London Beat.

Policing diversity in Lambeth is a comprehensive initiative intended to bring about positive change in the policing of Lambeth's diverse communities. Partnership and participation differentiate PDL from previous initiatives. In June 1997, a sub-group of the Lambeth community-police consultative group was established to formulate a new partnership between Lambeth's police and communities. This sub-group is called the policing diversity working group. It has drawn up an action plan that was completed with the full participation of the community and the community-police consultative committee. It represents the commitment of Lambeth police to begin the process of real change through partnership with the relevant communities. It also represents the commitment of the communities to work in partnership with their police service.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: Will the hon. Lady confirm that this exciting partnership was entered into voluntarily by the police and the local authority because both recognised its importance for the people whom they serve?

Kate Hoey: Of course it was entered into voluntarily. Indeed, it is the strength of many of these initiatives that people wanted them to happen. I know where the shadow Home Secretary is trying to lead me, but I do not think that it is relevant.

The action plan has been completed, and there are a number of recommendations. I mention it now because it is important that every support is given from headquarters and that there is no slackening of effort. The sub-group will examine ways to increase ethnic minority recruitment into the police service, as there is still a problem with under-representation. It will consider ways of developing local recruitment initiatives in conjunction with partners, as well as ways of trying to give people in the community a feeling that, although they do not make operational decisions, they are at least consulted.

For example, when we come to choose the key police officers in areas such as Lambeth, it is important that people feel that they have some say about the kind of officers they want and the way in which those officers should work, although the ultimate decision clearly has to lie with the Commissioner and the Home Secretary. Such initiatives are important and I hope that certain problems, perhaps to do with resources, do not prevent their being implemented.

I shall cite one instance of the police listening carefully to local opinion. Last year, there was a proposal to establish a custodial suite—a criminal justice facility—in Clapham instead of a new police station. The facility would have brought some 62 cells to an area which, even if one agreed that it needed them, was not suitable in terms of access for the whole borough. There was a great deal of consultation, and I was pleased that just last week it was announced that the criminal justice facility proposal has been dropped and that there would be a new police station, which is what people wanted. There is also the possibility of reducing the number of divisions in Lambeth. I pay tribute to the police for listening to the huge protests in the area, not local NIMBY protests but in Lambeth as a whole, and from the local authority.

The Lambeth firearms amnesty has already been mentioned, and I should like to put it in context. It did not just happen. In May and June, there were three firearms incidents in the borough—two were fatal, and in the other a young boy was shot through the door of his own home. On 17 June, there was a community police consultative committee meeting in the town hall, which I attended. It was a very volatile meeting. People were angry, but there was also a feeling that the community had almost accepted the fact that such incidents were going to happen and that guns would be used in the borough. There was almost a feeling of despair.

Thanks to the efforts of some very good local people and the work of the community-police consultative committee, people began to ask why they had to put up with such incidents. If there had been so many incidents in such a short time in one of the leafier parts of the country, there would have been outrage. People began to feel that they had to do something themselves. The initiative for the amnesty came from the community, but was quickly supported by the local police, the Commissioner and the Home Office. As has been said, it was launched by the Home Secretary. It was good that the Home Secretary was there and we were delighted that he gave his support, but the assembly hall was packed so early in the morning because people wanted to hear Ian Wright. He made a very simple, moving speech and, in a few short sentences, put over the message that having a gun on the streets was not cool. I hope that that message got through to some of those people for whom Ian Wright is a role model.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary confirmed, 12 guns have been handed in so far, together with a large amount of ammunition. That is a success. Some people have suggested that 12 guns are not a lot, but for Lambeth that is a real success story and there is still time to go. I hope that the media pick up on that and do not repeat the nasty attitude of one piece that I saw in the London *Evening Standard*, which suggested that the amnesty was a waste of time. It is not. We should be delighted about the results.

[Kate Hoey]

An excellent report called, "Deaths in Police Custody: Lessons from Tragedy" was produced last year by a Lambeth partnership spearheaded by the community-police consultative committee. Work on that is continuing. The police have taken all the action that they can, but some of the measures in the report need the Home Secretary's approval. I hope that we shall hear a little more about what might be done to implement the other recommendations in the report, which was widely accepted as a positive way to deal with some of the tragic deaths in police custody.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary mentioned CS spray. There is still concern in the community about the use of CS spray, although I do not share that concern. The policy was piloted in Streatham. There was consultation before the final operational decision was taken, which made a difference, even if some people did not agree with what was decided. We have to continue to be careful in our use of the spray, but everyone wants our police men and women to be protected in any way possible. If that means the use of CS spray, so be it.

In his comments on closed circuit television, the shadow Home Secretary did not mention Brixton, where the custody suite now has CCTV. That has been a major factor in building confidence about what happens to people in police stations. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to find a satisfactory technical solution to the problem of getting CCTV into police vans in Brixton. That is being worked on. I hope that the Commissioner does not give up, because CCTV in the police vans in which people are picked up would be another confidence-building measure.

We have lost some good police officers in Lambeth who have moved on or retired. I pay tribute to Superintendent Rees, who worked in Vauxhall for some time. That makes a real difference. I know the difficulties, but it is important to build up continuity. It is much better if we can keep our superintendents for as long as possible. We shall be losing Superintendent Ted Peel from Brixton soon as well. We also lost Alan O'Gorman, who did so much for the success of the Lambeth summer projects. Those projects were among the first efforts a few years ago to get local people to work with the police, bringing the local authority on board. They were very successful.

Being a police officer in Lambeth is a very difficult job. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will continue to ensure that officers in my borough are given the necessary resources and the support to make people feel that they are being policed properly and that they can walk the streets safely.

11.33 am

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). Maps from as far back as the 18th century mark the boundary of Westminster with a dotted line down the middle of the Thames. It is as much a pleasure to face her across the House as it is to face her across the river.

I was grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for North–West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) and the Home Secretary for their—literal—exchange about prostitutes' cards in telephone boxes. Westminster city council will also be grateful.

I am not sure whether the long tradition of debates on policing in London is threatened by the likely move to a different pattern of police authorities in the capital. In case it is, I pay retrospective tribute to the contributions made to such debates over many years by my erstwhile parliamentary neighbour, Sir John Wheeler, in a constituency capacity and as Chairman of the Home Affairs Select Committee, before he took up responsibility for security matters at the Northern Ireland Office.

The City of London has long had a police committee, as well as its own separate police force. They and I recognise that the policing problems of the City are different from the wider problems faced by the Met, just as the City community is different from the wider Greater London scene. A word about the City of London police is worth while in the larger tapestry of the debate. To the credit of the force, I want to make two points about crime and one about community support, rounding my comments off with figures from a generic test of public reaction.

The first development is the automatic number plate reader, which has generated 273 arrests since its inception in February this year. On average, more than 500,000 vehicles are read each week and checked against the vehicle database of the police national computer. Each individual operation takes four seconds. It is significant crime-busting technology, covering offences such as robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, stalking, sexual offences, witness intimidation and driving offences.

Secondly, I believe that the City of London force is the only force currently taking DNA samples from all persons charged or cautioned for notifiable crimes. Offenders who have committed crimes in other force areas have thereby been identified. That will gather speed as the database approaches an effective size.

The force's community support contribution that I should like to mention arose in the health area. There had been perceived public anxiety about heart attacks in the City as Bart's began to be run down. A broad partnership is providing automatic external defibrillators in four City of London force vehicles and at the Old Bailey, with 100 police officers trained in the project, in a force of fewer than 1,000 officers.

The most recent fraud arrests in the City are sub judice, but I close this cameo snapshot with the information from the report by Her Majesty's inspectorate that the combined public satisfaction with foot and mobile patrols in the City is 89 per cent., placing the force at the top of national public satisfaction figures. In a period of uncertainty about London governance, I express my appreciation for the reassurance that there are no plans to change the status of the City's force.

Moving westward into Westminster, I do not wish to give the impression of a different level of confidence in the Met, but I should like to stress some significant central London policing problems relating to homelessness and a separate concentration of recent immigrants. I serve as an officer of the parliamentary all-party groups on homelessness and on refugees. I shall not seek to examine whether my interest in talking on those subjects derives from those roles or from my constituency business, or which of those prompts the other. I suspect that it is probably a bit of both.

Now is not the time to deal with the rough sleepers initiative or go into the detailed figures, partly because I have had privileged access to the so far unpublished May

monitoring figures. The figures had been falling, but have now levelled off. Moreover, my constituency remains the principal source of incidence, as it has been for many years. I do not suggest that nothing changes, but I believe that the previous incidence of sleeping out under the arches and in the Strand has a resonance from the fact that the site where now stands the Savoy hotel and where once stood John of Gaunt's palace was host, under the Tudors and Queen Elizabeth, to a hostel for the homeless. That demonstrates a sad continuity of life in the capital.

There is evidence of rough sleeping showing fluctuation by area within central London, and by age and condition. There is a police dimension to that because, as with prostitution, residents are subject to variations in exposure to the phenomenon and look to the state's social arms to solve them.

There is a high incidence of alcohol abuse and, more locally, of drug abuse. There is also an incidence overall of mental instability which calls as often for Department of Health treatment. The underlying abuses give rise to specific and violent oral abuse towards pedestrians and bystanders, which prompts residents to have perhaps unfair expectations of what the police can do in the context. Latterly, there has been a particular and growing problem in the Victoria area, with a marked bias towards older rough sleepers. The consequences of that have exacerbated community tensions with residents.

Five of Westminster's six main police stations are in my constituency, and Westminster's police community consultative committees all meet in the constituency. I enjoyed the Home Secretary's post-1829 history. He will know that in addition to the activity on West India dock around the turn of the century, the history goes back still further to the Bow Street runners in Covent Garden who were based, as he alluded to, on the magistracy.

The central of the three police consultative committees, which is based in the west end, serves as an umbrella to a comprehensive homelessness forum in which the police also take part. To the three committees' combined credit, under police auspices, they will hold in the spring an all-day conference on the street people, to ventilate both opportunities and restraints. I am grateful to the police for their collaboration in the initiative. To be specific, the police homelessness unit at Charing Cross is well respected and well regarded by the homelessness agencies in central London. It has clearly been honed by long exposure to the problem.

For obvious reasons, I want to remain as neutral as I can in commentary on extra-Westminster experience. As the rough sleepers initiative has expanded, the agencies are not as invariably respectful towards the police response elsewhere. Zero tolerance-style initiatives at best move the street homeless around central London, as with prostitution, and at worst increase the intolerant harassment of them by others. There has been a rise, both quantitative and qualitative, in violence against street homeless people including, I fear, in Soho, stretching from some being set on fire while asleep to the murder of two young homeless people.

Mr. Michael: I recognise the seriousness of the issues with which the right hon. Gentleman is dealing. Will he, however, recognise that the term "zero tolerance" can be used in a variety of ways? The Government have used the term with some care. We have used it in terms of trying to deal with low levels of violence and disorder which sometimes grow to greater levels of crime and violence. We do not see zero tolerance as a reason for thoughtless or intolerant intrusion into the way in which particular social problems are dealt with.

Mr. Brooke: I am perfectly content to accept the Minister's intervention. I was seeking to address the consequences of particular actions towards the homeless.

On recent immigrants, I have become increasingly aware of a deterioration on what I will literally and not metaphorically call the north-west frontier of my constituency—the swathe between Marble Arch and Bayswater. At the South-East Bayswater residents association annual meeting last week, the divisional superintendent expressed his concern, which has since been reported by the local paper, at sharply rising crime rates. Violent crime is up by 60 per cent. in a year and street crimes up by 44 per cent.

On the morrow of the 60 Dover asylum seekers arriving by coach at Westminster City hall, I must dwell for a moment on the effect that asylum seeker concentrations are having on the perception of residents in the host community. In the Paddington division, that takes the form of immigrants from eastern Europe, the horn of Africa, the middle east and now from Algeria and other African countries.

I raised with the Home Office in August the issue of Romanian gypsies in Paddington and, much later, I got a general reply about asylum law, which I appreciated. It was, however, a general reply rather than a targeted response to this markedly unfavourable development in local eyes.

The following statistics I give descriptively and not evaluatively. Some 5 per cent. of all persons arrested in Paddington are from eastern Europe and 110 of the 123 persons reporting on bail at Paddington Green and Harrow Road police stations—Harrow Road police station is not in my constituency—were born outside this country. As they are, in the main, recent arrivals, they are not tied into any of the statutory or community systems that bring people together and, linguistically, they set the police a much larger problem than the one they have successfully solved with the Chinese in Soho.

The one silver lining to the problems with asylum seekers is that central Governments of both parties have accelerated the working together of local authorities and the police against those problems. I agree that that approach is reinforced by this Government's policy. I acknowledge that resolution of the problem that I am describing lies elsewhere in government, but I am aware that, in the meantime, the police have to cope with the consequences—and, here, resources become critical.

It would be silly to disguise anxiety on the ground of resources. I understand that no extra resources are to be given to local authorities, in the context of the recent consultation paper. I am perfectly happy to regard the jury as being out on the subject as far as the new Government are concerned, but I am among the one in five on the Conservative Benches who sat here before 1979. I am afraid that I do recall the 1979 inheritance, which was prompted first, by restraint on numbers and, secondly, by restraint on pay, which cost us in the 1970s the retirement of well-experienced 35-year-old police sergeants whose loss and absence were so conspicuous and serious when we expanded police numbers dramatically after 1979.

[Mr. Brooke]

I will air in conclusion a suspicion that is both an index of concern and a salient of hope. Very roughly, my diagnosis runs as follows. The police expansion after 1979 coincided with a simultaneous retraction in many other parts of the public sector—just as it did with significant parts of the private sector—so that the police were not obliged to use modern management techniques to wring the most out of their resources in the way that their less immediately fortunate colleagues had to do. The dividend is potentially still there at the centre of the Met. It will be a painful dividend because of lying fallow heretofore and it will call for uncommon leadership, but, to mix my north-west frontier metaphor, it is from that source—that untapped dividend—that the relief to the siege of Paddington may lie.

11.48 am

Ann Keen (Brentford and Isleworth): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for letting me speak in this important debate. The Metropolitan police services continue to strive to improve policing in London, and that is demonstrated very much by their community links within the London boroughs, which have already been referred to this morning. I commend the London borough of Hounslow on its home security scheme, in particular for 60-plus citizens. More than 2,000 homes have now benefited from home security systems and we have seen a difference.

We work continually with schools, with multi-agencies and with youth workers. Recently, Brentford school for girls put on a drama called "Danger Stranger" in which young people acted out roles for older citizens to make them aware of bogus callers. That is especially important at this time of year.

Our well-respected crime prevention officers and our excellent home beat officers work together within the community. I hope that the House will join me in congratulating the Brentford youth and community section of the police force on hosting Hounslow borough's youth seminar today on citizenship. Police Constable Neil Evans and his team have brought together ten 13-year-old students from each of 15 schools in Hounslow. This morning, a drama production took place, hosted by Cranford community school, demonstrating drugs abuse, how to make friends and form relationships, what happens when relationships break down, what happens in school, exam work and the students' future.

This afternoon, Isleworth and Syon boys school will be carrying out work through a music workshop and presentations. Football has already been mentioned this morning and I believe that some Chelsea footballers will attend the presentation. I think that Brentford footballers should have been used, but I am not in charge of the day.

By working together with those multi-agencies in an imaginative way, the police are demonstrating that one cannot lecture to young people about crime. It is important to learn how to prevent crime by working with young people on how to build relationships with adults and particularly the police. Our police force must be congratulated on the imaginative way in which they do that, many giving their own time and taking young people away on holiday for the first time. Those young people are made to feel respected, which is very important.

Community policing is valuable and not a soft option. Indeed, it is crucial and, when dealing with young offenders, we must look at the causes of crime. If young people are to respect older generations and the areas in which they live, they, too, must be shown respect. Sadly, the previous Government did little to help that. They did not invest in young people, but I am proud that the present Government are doing just that.

"Winning the race" is a document which was launched recently, and, like the Government, I whole-heartedly support it. It is important to deal with racial crime and, like other London boroughs, Hounslow has a multicultural society that is a family of one. Problems exist, however, and we must deal with recruitment and retention of black and Asian officers in the Metropolitan police. May I take this opportunity to congratulate Divisional Commander Barrie Meyers, who will soon retire from Hounslow police force? He and his family have contributed a great deal to racial harmony in Hounslow and I shall be sad to lose his experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Mr. Keen) will join me in congratulating him on his work.

I do not want that experience to be lost so I hope that we can look at ways of using officers who have given long service and have great experience to pass on to young officers and the community. Some officers enter the police force at degree level, but many have not obtained that academic recognition of their knowledge. Perhaps the courses that many officers spend much of their own time studying, so that they can specialise in child abuse or a range of subjects across the spectrum of community work, could be recognised and put in an academic setting so that they could be rewarded for their experience.

I shall keep my speech short because many of my hon. Friends want to speak in this important debate. We cannot deal with crime without dealing with youth crime and prevention. The Government will continue to invest in that.

11.53 am

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): May I take this opportunity to add the support and appreciation of the Liberal Democrats for the work of the Metropolitan police? My hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) has done that over the years, and I should like to continue that. We do not appreciate only the professionalism and courage of officers, which have been highlighted by the recent tragic death of WPC Nina Mackay. As a new Member of Parliament, I have noticed the courtesy and openness of the police service, both in Scotland Yard and in the local division. The police have shown a willingness to invite us in and talk with us without being defensive, which I had not expected from the police and which I find refreshing.

The issue that I want to home in on—several hon. Members have made the point in different ways—is that the police service in London is becoming seriously frayed at the edges. Various figures have been produced. Those that I have from the House of Commons Library suggest that in the past five years we have lost 1,300 officers and a further 813 civilians who substituted for professional officers in carrying out police work. That is a substantial haemorrhage of people who were doing, and could continue to do, police work.

The problem in some parts of London is much worse. My division has experienced a cut of 15 per cent. in police manpower, and it shows. One can see a distinct reduction in the number of police on the streets, and police stations have been partially closed. Money is simply not available for the projects that some hon. Members have eloquently described. The right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney), the Opposition spokesmen, recited at great length the number of closed circuit television systems, but he did not mention my constituency.

I was at a meeting in the middle of this week on an estate that won an award for its architectural design 15 years ago, but which is rapidly declining after years of social deprivation, and is now in serious social difficulties. We pulled together the community leaders in that area and one of the consensus demands was for a CCTV system. The police strongly endorsed the request, but said that they had no money; the council said that they had no money either; the lottery bid has failed; and I have written a begging letter, more in hope than in expectation, to Sir David Sainsbury, whose store is in the middle of the complex. The resources are simply not available for those crucial projects, so I do not understand the evidence that has been cited about the abundance of resources for policing of that kind.

As the Home Secretary described clearly and well, the origins of the problem lie in strict public expenditure restrictions over the past five years. Real spending on the police in London has been declining every year since 1993-94 and, regretfully, the present Government have adopted that severe approach to public expenditure management, which will result in further contraction.

In addition, there is the specific problem of pensions. I initiated an Adjournment debate in the House about a week ago on the fire service. The Metropolitan police's problems are not yet as serious as those of the fire service, but they are heading in the same direction. Some 16 per cent. of the police budget in London is accounted for by pensions. The police are therefore getting into the same vicious circle as the fire service, because as the numbers are cut back, there are fewer contributors and more police are retiring—they are living longer, and I welcome that.

The pensions budget is growing and squeezing out police services. Something will have to be done about that; the Home Office will have to deal with a problem that has been swept under the carpet for many years. Specifically, there will have to be more reserve provisioning for pensions. It is an unfunded scheme. Reserves will have to be set by and, if they are, more resources will have to come in to fund normal police services.

Let me highlight another aspect of the problem of funding of the London police. Are the Metropolitan police adequately compensated for the various services that they perform on behalf of the country as a whole? Some of those are obvious, such as the major national events and the protection of the royal family, although I had not realised that the Metropolitan Commissioner is responsible for the Queen when she is in Balmoral, as well as when she is in London. Then there is the policing of drugs. About 75 per cent. of all the realised earnings—rents—from the drug trade are realised in London. It is substantially a London problem.

One item deserves more attention from the House: the combating of terrorism, which is No. 1 in the objectives of the Metropolitan police in the recent statement. I find it more than a little irritating that under that heading there appears the cryptic note, "Costs not published." I do not know why that is the case. I readily understand why special branch officers do not want their photographs and addresses published in Metropolitan police reports, but there is no reason why we should not know what the cost of terrorism is. Why should we not be told?

I suspect that that is part of the rather childish approach to secrecy that has grown up in this country in relation to the secret services. I was a member of the diplomatic service at one time in my history, and I remember the days when we were not allowed to talk even to each other about the existence of the secret services; we referred to them as "our friends". We were not allowed to refer to their addresses; we had a mysterious convention called Box 500, which related to a well-known address in the west end of London that was regularly filmed on "Panorama".

That childish cult of secrecy has permeated even the Metropolitan police accounts. It is not a matter of idle curiosity. We cannot make a serious assessment of whether the top slicing of finance for Metropolitan police functions is adequately compensated until we know the cost of combating terrorism. I urge the Government to be more concerned about transparency in the reporting of that important aspect of Metropolitan police activities.

The thrust of my party's criticism relates to our overall approach to public expenditure. As the Home Secretary knows, we have been critical of the Government's approach to public expenditure. We think that they should have been more courageous about personal taxation. In this debate, I shall not hide behind the general prescription of more personal taxation, but I shall make a few specific suggestions about how cash-pressed police authorities, including London, might approach the question of revenue. Some of my suggestions may be a little controversial, but I want to air them in the House.

The first suggestion is that we might look a little more creatively at charging. The Metropolitan police should charge for the services that they provide for national events of a commercial kind. I am the Member of Parliament for Twickenham, and I did some research on the costings of tomorrow's big event, when England play Australia in my constituency. I discovered that the cost to the taxpayer of providing policing outside the ground—it is sophisticated, high-cost, mounted police surveillance—is about £40,000. The Rugby Football Union pays £10,000 for policing inside the ground, but the bulk of the cost falls on the taxpayer.

That is the cost of one match. If we multiply that by 10 for the year, we are speaking of £500,000 at one ground alone, but there is not just one ground. Anyone who tries to travel out towards the M3 at any time of the year will know that on a Saturday one cannot do that, because we do not just have the Rugby Football Union; we have three first division rugby union sides and the second rugby league side in Britain—all playing within a mile of each other. All that imposes substantial costs.

It is a growing source of resentment not only among my constituents but among many others, that much of the cost of that provision, for a highly commercial,

[Dr. Vincent Cable]

professional sport, is borne by them. They cannot get access to the grounds, they are not allowed to watch the match on television, because the rights have been appropriated by Rupert Murdoch, and, to add insult to injury, they are told that they must pay for it all through taxation. That is wrong, and the authorities must look at the principle of making a charge for that purpose, not just in respect of rugby union, but in respect of premier league matches, big matches at Wembley and other similar events.

There is another area in which charging would be right and appropriate. A great deal of police time is wasted on call-outs to commercial premises where burglar alarms and fire alarms have not been properly maintained. That is a cost to the police and to the taxpayer. I see no reason, in principle, why a charge should not be levied after one or more false calls from a commercial premises, as substantial amounts of money and police time are involved. The police must consider charging as a way of generating additional income.

Another, and perhaps even more controversial, approach could involve what the Treasury somewhat pompously calls "hypothecation"—that is, money generated as a result of police activity which normally disappears into the Treasury. I suggest that, on some occasions, that money might more appropriately go directly to the police. An obvious case is when substantial amounts of cash are liberated from drug barons and other villains. Why should that money not go to the police—perhaps to fund activities related directly to drug prevention?

A steadier stream of income could be generated from fixed-fine offences. I am sure that hon. Members have noticed, as I have, the enormous contrast between the zeal with which local parking officials collect fines on behalf of the council and the somewhat less energetic approach employed by the police in respect of their responsibilities. Of course, the police have better things to do in some cases. We could deal with that issue in two ways: first, by decriminalising many minor traffic responsibilities that rest with the police, thereby freeing the police for other duties; secondly, by insisting that the fines that currently pass from the courts to the Treasury go directly to the police service. Some police forces in Merseyside and Warwickshire have begun to examine those suggestions, and I think that we could be a little more imaginative in that area.

As to efficiency, I do not agree with the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) who claimed that vast reservoirs of productivity gains could be squeezed from the police—I suspect that most of them were squeezed out a long time ago. However, there are sources of inefficiency in the system that could be tackled.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), who has a county court in his constituency, pointed out that substantial numbers of police officers often spend days sitting around in court waiting to be summoned by magistrates. With a little more thought and inter-agency co-operation, we could save the police force an enormous amount of time. Perhaps police could be equipped with Mandelson bleepers; I think that is what they are called these days. Such economies are cheap. The Liberal Democrats want to see public services funded properly and we want to see the tax mechanism used for that purpose. However, I believe that we should look creatively at other options.

In conclusion, I shall raise two issues that have nothing to do with police finances but which merit mention. The first involves community relations. I probably have one of London's smallest ethnic minorities in my constituency. However, as a Londoner, I value the fact that we have a multicultural and varied ethnic society. I do not view that as a problem, but as something positive of which we should be proud. Companies are beginning to locate in London because of our diverse society.

It is fair to say that, starting from a very low base, the Metropolitan police have adapted extremely well to that situation—certainly in the past five years. The attitudes that I encounter, particularly among senior officers, are enlightened and far sighted. The Metropolitan police undergo some very advanced training in coping with ethnic and inter-ethnic relationships, which is most commendable. I salute their work: they are far ahead of the armed forces in that respect.

None the less, we should not be complacent: some problems exist. It is no illusion when I see police frequently pulling over expensive cars, an extraordinarily high number of which have black or Asian drivers. There is a creeping process of stop and search that is very difficult to pin down and identify. I think that there are problems with stereotyping at grassroots level in the police force which need to be addressed.

Finally, we support the move towards London governance and would welcome the emergence of an elected police authority. It is a great credit to the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that he has anticipated and welcomed that body, thereby demonstrating his openness to a more democratic form of management.

In my discussions with police, some anxiety has emerged about what form London governance will take as it affects the police. The police hope to see the kind of model that we have in British provincial government: the typical police authority. Some police are concerned that the mayoral system will distort that model. They fear—perhaps it is a misapprehension which the Home Secretary can correct—that hyperactive New York-style mayors will intervene in operational policing matters because of the many brownie points to be collected in that area.

Mr. Straw: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman. I made it quite clear in my opening remarks that we intend to replicate, so far as possible, the tripartite arrangements that exist in the provinces for the government of police. The difference will be to take account of the Met's national and capital policing functions, which will involve continuing involvement by the Home Secretary. I should make it clear that we have no plans whatever to provide for the mayor or any police authority—including myself—to have operational control of the police. That is a matter for the chief officers of police.

Dr. Cable: I thank the Home Secretary. Many police officers, as well as members of the public, will be reassured by that clarification.

I reiterate our very strong support for the police, our concern over the depletion of resources, our belief that the police should be better funded, and the need to look beyond taxation to new sources of revenue.

12.10 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): On behalf of my constituents, I endorse the remarks of other hon. Members. We all benefit from the commitment of police officers to serve our areas.

On partnerships, the police recognise that they cannot succeed alone. Indeed, it is my submission that we did not expect them to do so. The word "partnerships" seems to be in vogue at the moment, with people referring to them in all sorts of areas. From my experience, since being elected to the House, it is a matter to which we should devote as much time as possible, as there are benefits to be had all around.

There is a need for local authorities, schools, youth outreach workers and the police to combine to solve youth crime. Only last week in my constituency, a member of the public who had acted as a witness in a particularly difficult crime was attacked by youths as a result. On one occasion—a Wednesday evening—while the police were in my constituent's house, the police car was attacked. The next evening, before the police arrived, youths in the area stoned all the windows of the house, and the young children living in it had to be taken elsewhere to other relations. That illustrates the need for strong policing.

The problem that we have in Upminster, which forms part of the Havering division, is that, over the years, resources for policing the area have been reduced. It is assumed to be a leafy suburb that does not need the same level of policing as other areas—indeed, the figures show a continual reduction in the number of police officers for that area—but we do have black spots, and in those areas police station opening hours have been reduced, as have police numbers. That not only lessens the deterrent effect but gives rise to a fear of crime in the area. Therefore, we should look at this matter much more carefully. With a good working relationship with local authorities, youth outreach workers and schools, some of these problems can be solved. For that reason, the proposals in the crime and disorder Bill will be welcome.

Opposition Members criticised Labour councillors and, indeed, Labour Members of Parliament. My perception is that there is a need for local public involvement, and that proposal comes from the public. It is not something that Labour councillors or Labour Members dreamed up. Of course, the public look to their representatives for a resolution of the problems that are associated with crime. In other words, they want their councillors and Members to be involved. Community orders will act as a conduit.

The criticism that has been directed at Labour Members is unfair. The suggestion that Labour Members merely smile and do not present their constituents' problems to the Home Secretary is wrong. Of course we make representations to the Home Secretary. Such criticism is unjust.

There are good examples throughout the country of partnerships working with the retail sector of business. In my constituency, however, many of the smaller business retailers feel that they cannot join these partnerships as we in this place might expect they would. One of the problems lies with the change in taxation which occurred some years ago with the introduction of the uniform business rate. That is not especially relevant to the debate, but it reflects the attitude of some retailers. I accept that there is not a direct link.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): I intervene as very much a part-time retailer. In the London borough of Hillingdon, we have recently been awarded a Home Office grant for closed circuit television in Uxbridge town centre. The local retailers were responsible for a large part of the matching funding. When I was a member of the Uxbridge initiative committee, the then deputy leader of Hillingdon council said that CCTV was not a matter for the ratepayers and that he did not want to allocate any council funds to it; he thought that it was entirely a matter for retailers. Many councils have provided money for CCTV and, under pressure, so did Hillingdon council, but it was not willing to do so.

Mr. McDonnell *rose—*

Mr. Darvill: I shall—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I recommend that the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) deals with one intervention before he runs into another.

Mr. Darvill: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The experience of the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) is different from mine in some parts of my constituency. The police consulted and representations were made to me as the constituency Member. Representations were made also to the local authority. There are different enthusiasms, but the thrust of the argument is that local authorities and central Government should be encouraging partnerships.

The local business community in my constituency found that, with the introduction of the UBR, they had not developed links with the chamber of commerce or the local authority. That is something at which we need to work.

I read some of the information that has been provided by the Library on funding. Since 1979, the proportion of funding in London, compared with the rest of the country, has fallen, fluctuating between 26 and 30 per cent. This year's figure is 25.5 per cent., so the amount that the Metropolitan police area receives as a proportion of that received by the whole country has fallen. That puts pressure on outer-London areas, thus creating difficulties.

Mr. McDonnell: I apologise to my hon. Friend for intervening so abruptly earlier. While on the subject of resources for the police, we should also consider the availability of resources for local authorities to install closed circuit television. As the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) said, the issue for Hillingdon was that, having had an horrendous revenue support grant settlement from the previous Government, the council had to prioritise its investment in CCTV. That is an investment in the protection of life and limb, particularly of those families enduring racial attack and harassment. In that context, a council may want to put the onus for retail protection on the retailer. I am sure that my hon. Friend would agree that it is a matter of priorities, and socialism is the language of priorities.

Mr. Darvill: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. I was about to make that point. There is a problem not only with funding for the Metropolitan police but with particularly bad local authority resourcing through the standard spending assessment. Local authorities find it

[Mr. Darvill]

increasingly difficult to work with the police and with retailers. If we are to encourage partnerships with local authorities, we must not ignore the funding implications.

In my area, the police have had some success in combating burglary and theft. However, violence and youth crime have increased. Although the public are pleased about the improvement in the clear-up rate for burglary, that has not eroded their fear of crime. We must develop policies to deal with those problems.

12.22 pm

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I am glad to be called in this annual debate on the policing of London. I am particularly pleased to follow the hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill), and to congratulate him on his thoughtful contribution, although I do not exactly agree with him and with his interpretation of certain statistics.

I am disappointed that the number of Metropolitan police officers has declined slightly in the past year, but that should be put in context. We should recall that, 18 years ago, there were fewer than 22,000 Metropolitan police officers, whereas today there are well over 27,000, which is an increase of about 20 per cent. Overall, the previous Government held good to their commitment: they increased significantly the number of police officers.

The budget rose dramatically. I was interested to hear the comparison given by the hon. Member for Upminster. He will know that the budget is just under £2,000 million a year, which represents a real-terms increase of almost 90 per cent. on 1979—allowing for inflation. More important, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who confirmed that morale in the Metropolitan police 18 months ago was at a low ebb.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): Eighteen years ago.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am sorry—18 years ago. The Minister may be able to give us the figures, but, compared with 18 years ago, there are more bobbies on the beat. In other words, more civilians have been brought in to do the work previously done by policemen which it was unnecessary for them to do. That was a commendable performance by the last Conservative Government.

A perennial source of worry is the high turnover of officers leaving the Metropolitan police force. Officers are not necessarily retiring or taking a different job, but going to police other areas of the country where they find attractions. In the long term, the Government will have to look at the London allowance for officers of the Met and at whether bonuses can be given according to the length of a constable's service in the Met.

By any standards, our Metropolitan police officers are asked to perform a difficult, dirty and dangerous job. I want to stress the dangers, and I repeat the statistic I gave when the Home Secretary kindly allowed me to intervene on his speech. Last year, according to the annual report, 12,276 police officers were injured while on duty, of which 3,280 were injured as a result of being assaulted while on duty. Those appalling figures demonstrate yet again the debt we owe to those people who serve us in tackling crime and disorder in our great capital city.

During the past 18 years, I accept that crime has increased dramatically not only in London but throughout the rest of the country. However, we must remember that the number of recorded crimes has gone down in the past four years—I think in the country as a whole, but certainly in the Metropolitan police area. Over the past four years, crime is down by almost 11 per cent.—by just over 100,000 crimes. Within that number, burglaries are down by 21 per cent. and car theft by 24 per cent. I applaud the special initiatives undertaken by the Metropolitan such as Operation Eagle Eye and Operation Bumblebee. I am pleased also that the detection rate is improving; that is good news for all Londoners.

The hon. Member for Upminster made the point that, unfortunately, serious crime—particularly crimes involving injury—have increased in our capital city over the past few years. That is a problem which the Home Secretary will want to address. Sir Paul Condon's foreword to the report says that, although he acknowledges that serious crimes are up, part of the reason for that is

"changes in police recording procedures".

Perhaps the Minister will give a little more information about that, although whether he can reassure us remains to be seen.

I cannot find in the annual report information on the significance of the increase in serious recorded crime as a result of changes in police recording procedures. I have said that expenditure on the Metropolitan police is now just under £2,000 million a year. That is a huge increase, but it is worth noting that the previous Government planned an increase of about 3.4 per cent. for the current financial year—an increase of about £55 million. As the need to constrain public expenditure is currently shared by all hon. Members, such an increase is not to be sneezed at.

In the context of the Metropolitan police budget, I think that all hon. Members are deeply concerned about the rising cost of pensions, which I understand are unfunded and have to be met out of revenue. That problem will have to be faced not only by the Metropolitan police service but by the London fire and civil defence authority. The figures that I have gleaned—the Minister may care to confirm them—show that the pension bill now amounts to about £290 million a year. I reckon that that is 15 per cent. of the total budget, but I do not want to exaggerate and should point out that in his foreword Sir Paul Condon says that it is 9.9 per cent. of the total budget.

Whatever the percentage, it is a significantly rising figure. It is certainly 12 per cent. up on the previous year and I think that there has been an increase of about 50 per cent. over the past five years. The only way to get around that is by some special arrangement. It would be totally wrong to expect that a sum more than, never mind as much as, any increase in the Metropolitan police budget would be offset by the huge extra demand on police pensions.

The Metropolitan police have to tackle racism. We all take the view that racism is an obnoxious evil. It must be stamped out, and the courts and police must have the powers to do that. I understand that the crime and disorder Bill will contain clauses to give extra powers to the courts. Perhaps the Minister will give further detailed information on the Government's proposals. When I looked at the matter, I concluded that the police had all the powers that

they need to tackle racism under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Perhaps the Minister will refer to that when he is summing up.

Finally, I agree with the hon. Member for Upminster about the importance of a partnership between the police and the public in tackling crime. I welcome the new schemes on crime partnership which have been introduced by some London boroughs and I wish them success. Pioneering local crime prevention schemes are important and I instance the one known as Watchlink, which co-ordinates the neighbourhood watch schemes in the metropolis. I think that I am right in saying that there are more than 12,000 neighbourhood watch schemes in Greater London. They are a good and concrete example of that partnership, which we all know is important in tackling crime.

I welcome the development in closed circuit television. I note that the previous Government—I think that the Home Secretary was a little unfair about this—having provided £37 million for CCTV schemes, pledged a further £75 million in the lifetime of this Parliament. That is not such a considerable sum that it cannot be found.

Mr. Michael: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that it was such a generous offer, will he explain why the previous Government did not put it in the budget lines?

Sir Sydney Chapman: I cannot because I was not a member of the Government and I do not know the exact detail. I do not even know what the Minister means by putting it in the budget lines, but is he saying that a manifesto commitment should be disregarded if it has not been put "in the lines"? I am sure that he is not saying that. As the previous Government did provide £37 million for CCTV, it is not unreasonable to say that they would have met their commitment to provide £75 million over four to five years.

Mr. Michael: It is easy to judge the previous Government by their record. In 1992, they promised 1,000 additional police officers and failed to deliver them; in fact, they cut police numbers. They failed to provide for CCTV beyond this year. That is a failure to meet the rhetoric that they used in the pre-election period. It is simple.

Sir Sydney Chapman: When Ministers in this new Government fail to respond positively to an intervention, they usually say, "I wonder how the hon. Gentleman has the brass cheek to say that because his Government, when they were in power," and so on. I am inclined to say the opposite or to give it back to the Minister. I know that he is a relatively new Member, but if he compares the condition, the numbers and the funding of the Metropolitan police in 1979 with the position in 1997, he will find that the last Conservative Government hugely increased the commitment to the police.

I welcome the CCTV schemes and I hope that they will continue. The Metropolitan police have already been helped by DNA testing. I welcome the database and was pleased to hear what the Home Secretary said about that. That raises the issue of the introduction of technology in fighting crime. We have to be prepared to change the structure and perhaps the administration of our police force, given these new technological innovations.

A police station around the corner from where any one of our constituents lives is reassuring—we all accept that—but often, if our constituents have an emergency and ring 999, help comes from not the local police station but from further afield. We have to accept that. It is not the nearness of the police station that is necessarily important, but the response time in dealing with emergency cases.

Often, the police station around the corner contains only one or two policemen manning the front desk, while the other policemen are out and about keeping the peace, so I suggest that, in the next four or five years, there will be proposals to close some old smaller police stations and to reposition larger ones further away from many of our constituents. We have to be prepared to consider such suggestions responsibly rather than with just a knee-jerk reaction, saying, "No, it has always been there. It must remain."

Last Sunday, Remembrance Sunday, we all had the opportunity of meeting police in our constituencies. After the wreath laying, the service and the march past, I talked to some of my bobbies on the beat, if I may call them that, and asked them to give politicians an example of what could help the police. The answer was that they would like members of the public to record the serial numbers of unfixed equipment in their homes that could be stolen during a burglary. That is an important point to pass on. If we record the serial numbers of cameras, videos, televisions, bicycles or whatever, that would be a good thing. It is quite separate from continuing to encourage the marking of such goods, especially the more important items.

Finally—

Mr. Michael: For the sixth time!

Sir Sydney Chapman: Sorry.

Finally and in conclusion, the Home Secretary and others have referred to Arsenal. I have a problem when that word is used. It seems that half of my constituents support Arsenal, while the other half support Tottenham. I assure the House that I do not sit on the fence in this matter—I enthusiastically support Barnet. Unfortunately, that football club may move from my constituency to a much better site down the road in a neighbouring constituency. I wish it well.

I hope that recorded crime continues to fall in the metropolis, that funding and the detection rate continue to rise, and that the numbers in the Metropolitan police quickly return to full strength.

12.42 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I want to report on some of the activities in my constituency to develop community partnerships to tackle crime. I want also to refer to a couple of cases that have previously been dealt with by the Metropolitan police but are currently of concern to me.

I do not want to be contentious, but I was surprised by the speeches of some Conservatives Members who previously presided over a capital city in which crime doubled while the number of police officers fell. I can remember the commitment given by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) that there would be an additional 5,000 police officers, some 1,000 of whom would be for London. Instead, we lost 770.

[Mr. John McDonnell]

Since the general election, many of us have worked hard to build a safety partnership with our communities. We have regular meetings with police officers. For example, I regularly meet the local superintendent, Alan Shave. He is an excellent professional in his field, but unfortunately he is now moving on. I wish him well in his future career and I am sure that he will rise to the top. I also meet inspectors Pat McGuire and Peter Hughes to examine local problems. I go out on the beat with local beat officer Rob Leighton and others. I have also been out in a police car, but because of a combination of travel sickness and absolute terror I doubt whether I shall do so again.

I meet the police consultative committee—something my predecessor refused to do. We have convened a community conference and we have had brainstorming sessions on community policing and community safety, all of which have resulted in the launch of new initiatives. We have a multi-agency approach to tackling problems on our estates, especially youth crime.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has visited my constituency twice and opened a new youth centre in an area where we have had specific problems with youth crime and general incivility. We have launched initiatives with the police force, through local Members of Parliament and the local authority, to tackle racial harassment and attacks. The local police have operated a mini zero tolerance exercise in the town centre, where there have been some problems. I welcome the new Government's approach to community partnership, which we are working hard to implement at local level. I also welcome legislation to strengthen community safety and the youth crime initiatives that were partially outlined today by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Hon. Members representing London constituencies are hampered—we may as well be straight about it—by the impact of the national formula for the distribution of resources. The impact of recent resource losses makes it time for us—as a cross-party group of London Members of Parliament—to undertake further discussions on the formula.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) said, constituencies that can be described as covering the peripheral parts of London—those on the edge of London, between country and inner city—have been affected by the London formula, which penalises success. When we have been successful in reducing crime, we lose police officers. Such an outcome cannot be right. Ensuring that we are not impeded in our attack on crime will require discretion and flexibility.

It is time to re-examine the additional resources given to London to deal with national and imperial functions. Those resources are inadequate and do not begin to reflect the real demands on police time and resources in dealing with national operations in the capital.

As other hon. Members have said in this debate, insufficient local authority resources have played a role in undermining services that ensure community safety. In my area, we do not have a mediation scheme because we lack resources for one. In the coming months, however, we will attempt to identify both local authority and private sector matching funding to launch such a scheme.

We have a domestic violence initiative run by the local authority and local police, but it is dramatically understaffed and under-resourced. The initiative's staff, however, are excellent and hard working.

Local people are working with their local authority and with local police on incidents of racial harassment and attack, but they are under-resourced. It is time for the Commissioner to produce another report on the role of ethnic minorities in the Metropolitan police, not only to ensure—as the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) said—that they are reflecting our community's ethnic composition but to ensure that we are monitoring the effectiveness of racial and ethnic awareness in police training.

The House has not debated policing in London annually because the previous Government did not allow an annual debate. I deeply regret that the House sometimes debated the subject only once every two years. London may, however, get a fairer share of time and resources with the establishment of a police authority within a strategic authority for London. It is ludicrous that the Home Secretary has been London's police authority.

The Metropolitan police committee has been only a token of democratic accountability. Sir John Quinton—an amiable duffer, who I have met—is not a Londoner. He does not live in London and he has a greater knowledge of the Norwich City football team than of policing in London. I respect the work that he has valiantly tried to do on the MPC, but it is not an accountable body. We need a democratically elected and representative body that will enable us to supervise policing in London.

I should like to deal with two cases. The first concerns Frank Johnson, who has been in prison for 22 years after being convicted of murder. I visited him in prison. His case has been referred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. On the evidence that has been published so far, I am convinced that he will be released. He would have been released much earlier, but he has refused to accept guilt, insisting on his innocence.

After the Criminal Cases Review Commission has considered Frank Johnson's case and—I am convinced—found in his favour, I invite the Home Secretary to ensure that those who were responsible for denying to his defence, evidence thereby proving his innocence, are brought to book and properly prosecuted. It does not matter how long ago the case occurred.

I want to draw attention to a more recent constituency case, which I should like the Home Secretary to meet the Commissioner to discuss. A few weeks ago, Mr. Lakhvinder "Ricky" Reel, a 22-year-old constituent, went with his friends to Kingston. He was chased by a group of skinheads and racist abuse was hurled at him. The group of friends split up and Mr. Reel went missing. His body was found in the Thames two weeks later.

Despite my close liaison with the local police, Mr. Reel's family are not happy with the speed, seriousness or availability of resources employed by Kingston police in the investigation. The family cannot come to terms with the death of their beloved son until they know exactly what happened to him. I urge the Home Secretary to ask the Commissioner to undertake an inquiry into the investigation of the case. If necessary, I am happy to facilitate a meeting between the family and the Commissioner so that the family can express their concerns.

Despite my concern about the two cases I have outlined, I do not wish to detract from Labour Members' overall support and admiration for the men and women who daily risk their lives to secure our safety in London. Our task is to ensure that they are adequately resourced, adequately empowered and adequately supported by the Government.

12.50 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I join right hon. and hon. Members who have paid tribute to the Metropolitan police. I would also like to thank the police in Kingston, including Bill Wilson, a very distinguished policeman who was the chief superintendent of our local division for several years and who retired earlier this year, and Peter Lally, his replacement, whom I welcome. I wish him well in his work.

I am disturbed to hear that a constituent of the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) was murdered in Kingston and that the victim's family are unhappy about the way in which the Kingston division responded. That may reflect the fact that the Kingston division needs more resources. I am happy to assist the hon. Gentleman in his efforts to get to the bottom of the case.

I want to bring to the House's attention the resourcing problems facing Kingston division and area No. 5. Without warning, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) got in before me and mentioned some of the difficulties in area No. 5, which has suffered significant cuts compared with other parts of London. The cuts have been especially severe in the Kingston division. In just two years, we have lost more than 40 police officers—more than 10 per cent. of our manpower. Station opening hours have also been cut.

The hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) said that we should not regard police stations as sacred cows. He might be right, but I have anecdotal evidence that suggests that the reduction in the opening hours of stations in New Malden and Surbiton has led to an increase in crime on the high streets there. I have heard that from retailers and residents, who say that local criminals know that, as police stations are not manned all hours, the police response to crime near the stations will be slower. That is a result of the cuts made under the previous Government.

The local police division has responded magnificently to the budget constraints imposed on it. It has restructured and reduced the number of sectors to try to use the remaining manpower far more efficiently, but I am still not convinced that, even with these efficiency measures, it will be able to provide the standard of policing that it provided prior to the cuts. The cuts have seriously undermined its ability to police the streets of Kingston and Surbiton. That is a great concern. I shall watch closely, with other residents and the local police and community consultative group, to see how the new structures perform.

I hope that if and when the Commissioner reads my speech tomorrow he will be aware of the need to discover whether the cuts that have been imposed on the Kingston division have undermined the ability of local police officers to patrol our streets. He should not allow any further cuts; he must be sure the police can stabilise crime levels in our area with the current efficiency measures.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington talked about the formula for police resources in London, which I believe is the key point for the debate. The allocation and use of manpower across the capital are operational decisions for the Commissioner, but the formula that he uses for distributing resources could be debated. It is highly controversial, with many subjective elements. For example, the formula rates the police resources put into investigating a burglary as equal to those required to investigate a murder. That is clearly not sensible. Ministers should ask the Commissioner to review the formula urgently and give him back-up support.

I should like to make an early lobby on the factors that should be taken into account in the review. In Kingston, we should not be trying just to stave off further cuts, but expanding our police force to meet future problems. The formula should take into account the underlying dynamics of crime. At the moment, it just paints a static picture, which cannot be right. If the formula is not dynamic, it will not be sensitive to likely future movements in the crime statistics. If it is based purely on historical factors, it is almost certain to be wrong.

There are several dynamic factors in Kingston that are likely to necessitate more resources for our local police service. Kingston already has a vibrant night life. A huge number of new pubs have opened in recent years. If all the applications before the authorities for new pubs and night clubs were approved, there would be a 100 per cent. increase in the number of young people coming out of clubs and bars in Kingston town centre in the early hours. That would clearly leave the police needing extra resources.

Local people are trying to react to the developments. Local magistrates, the local authority and the local police have opposed applications for new licences time and again, but their opposition has been turned down almost without exception. Local people, who understand the local situation, are almost powerless to prevent the dynamics that I am talking about. It is very important that Ministers and the Commissioner realise that the trend in Kingston town centre is likely to be towards greater night time activity, with more people, often under the influence of alcohol, turning out on to the streets. More resources will be needed to deal with that.

There is also the dynamic of population. There is a clear shift of people from inner London to outer London, while the trend in police resources in recent years has been for a shift from outer London to inner London. I am not saying that that was necessarily always wrong, but there will be more people in the outer suburbs in future.

Many housing developments are going up in Kingston, which suggest that the population in our area is likely to surge in the next few years. What is relevant is not just the total population, but its composition. In Kingston, we have a young population: the university has trebled its size in the past 10 years. I do not, of course, want to impugn the character of the students at Kingston university. With so many of them going into the pubs and nightclubs of Kingston, however, there may be a knock-on effect on the need for police resources.

Kingston is also a major retail centre. I am pleased to say that it is a successful one and is booming. That means, however, that there is a massive influx of visitors to Kingston town centre during the day for shops and at night for pubs and clubs. That requires police resources.

[Mr. Edward Davey]

We have heard much about partnerships today. My local authority is working with the police and the private sector and it has invested in closed circuit television. Kingston council has found the money to provide a town manager to liaise with local business and to ensure that its concerns are met as quickly as possible and that any problems are dealt with as soon as they can be. There is partnership to deal with the problems, but all involved in the partnership say that they need more resources from the police to make those good initiatives work.

The final dynamic that I want to bring to the House's attention is the proliferation of drugs and alcohol. Hon. Members may say that Kingston is just a leafy suburb. According to magistrates, however, whom I have met on several occasions since the election, between eight and nine out of 10 incidents that come before them are in some way related to drugs or alcohol. They are a major problem in our area—a major dynamic behind the increase in crime.

We are talking not only about resources to meet the problems, but about multi-agency approaches and about using current resources better. However, all the people involved in tackling the problems say that they cannot succeed only through that approach and that they need more police. I urge the Commissioner and the Home Secretary not to allow a formula that is static and based on historic data to dictate the way in which resources are allocated across the capital. We need to look to the future and the formula needs to be more sensitive.

We must also consider ways in which the police could use money more efficiently. My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) gave a number of examples. He mentioned an example that I whispered in his ear earlier. The police in Kingston are often required to spend a lot of time in the magistrates court and the county court. The police headquarters is two minutes from both courts so the local police asked the courts whether the officers needed for cases that day could be given pagers and called when the relevant case was about to be heard, but their request was turned down. That prevents the chief superintendent from using his resources rationally.

There are many other ways in which we could use resources more effectively. I shall give an example from my constituency, which has 10 railway stations, of the way in which the British Transport police work with the Metropolitan police. When there is an incident at a station or on a train coming into my constituency, it is dealt with by the local police, although an alarm button may have been pressed and the British Transport police may be thundering on their way to deal with the problem. They arrive half an hour late and the incident has already been dealt with. Such lack of co-ordination leads to a poor use of resources. Although the Metropolitan police have dealt with the individuals concerned, it is the British Transport police who have responsibility for following up the incident. That does not seem a rational use of resources.

I emphasise that local people and local councillors in the borough of Kingston are working hard in partnership with the different agencies to try to tackle crime. The Home Secretary announced recently the requirement on local authorities to produce crime audits. The royal borough of Kingston already does that and is working proactively to tackle crime. I urge Ministers and the Commissioner not to penalise areas that already take all those initiatives successfully because that will undermine their success and put our constituents' safety at risk.

1.4 pm

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey), whose constituency borders mine, on his sensible remarks about the importance of community and partnership policing. That is an area in which we can work together in the interests of our constituents.

May I take this opportunity to inform the House that last night I was a guest at the Ambassadors for London awards. I accompanied an organisation in my constituency, which received a special award for the many hundreds of thousands of visitors brought into London and the millions of pounds of revenue generated by its activities during two special weeks of the year. The organisation is the All England Lawn Tennis club, which I nominated for the award. As it was taking the award, I wondered whether, next year, there could be a special award for the Metropolitan police. I am sure that the House shares my view that the Metropolitan police play a special role as ambassadors for London. The bobbies of London have always been ambassadors for London and a major attraction. Not only do they make life safer for those who visit London but their friendly approach and style of policing make us justly proud of them as one of the finest forces in the world. I take this opportunity to salute them for that reason.

The importance of good community policing must be seen in the light of economic regeneration, especially in urban areas. At the opposite end of my constituency to the All England Lawn Tennis club is the Abbey Partnership policing initiative. The shadow Home Secretary referred to that project, and the previous Home Secretary and my right hon. Friend the current Home Secretary have both visited it. It has made a valuable contribution to making our streets safer and to making my constituents fear crime less, and it is a cornerstone of our local strategy for economic and urban regeneration.

On the Commissioner's report on the policing of London, I wish to express on behalf of my constituents my gratitude to the Merton division of the Metropolitan police for the high standard of work that has contributed to such an achievement and for its efforts to develop partnerships in the community as a priority of its local strategy. I am particularly pleased to refer to the efforts undertaken to establish such partnerships between the police and the London borough of Merton. That has led to many pioneering projects. I have already referred to the Abbey Partnership policing initiative under the umbrella of the Merton partnership against crime. The Merton partnership has also done excellent work to tackle problems such as racial assault and harassment and domestic violence.

As I said in my maiden speech on Monday, Wimbledon is a multicultural and diverse area of London where we have a number of problems with racially motivated crime and harassment. I congratulate the Merton division on its work to tackle that problem, which has been important in establishing good community relations and trust between different parts of the community. Local regeneration, both economic and social, depends on that trust.

It is important to bear in mind the fact that until now, such partnership work has not been viewed nationally as a core policing responsibility. That has meant that, to resource such activities, individual local police managers have had to make out an annual case for the maintenance of those much-needed activities.

In that context, I welcome the Home Office's proposed changes to the police national key objectives. Those changes will better reflect the major initiatives that our Government have set in train to tackle crime and its causes. The revised objectives will clearly identify targets for the reduction of local crime and disorder in partnership with the local authorities, other local agencies and the public. The Abbey Partnership policing initiative is already a partnership between the magistrates courts, the probation service for south-west London which is located in my constituency, the local police and the local authority.

I look forward to the inclusion of the new objectives in the Metropolitan police plan as a way of guaranteeing that partnership and tackling local crime problems are placed at the heart of Metropolitan police work. As I have shown, we have in Wimbledon and in Merton as a whole an excellent example of the kind of partnership between the police, local authorities and other agencies that the Government will emphasise in their crime and disorder Bill. I know that the police in Merton support the measures to be proposed in the Bill, especially the theme of partnership with local authorities and the local community.

As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, the Bill will place a duty on local authorities and the police to develop statutory partnerships for crime prevention. That is an essential element in the switch of emphasis towards reducing the incidence of crime and disorder, rather than simply reacting to them once they have occurred.

I welcome the Government's intention to create a Metropolitan police service that is accountable to Londoners through the establishment of a police authority for London as part of their plans for the Greater London authority. The consultations on the plans have revealed widespread public support in London generally and in the part of London that I represent.

I know from direct experience that the police in my constituency of Wimbledon and the London borough of Merton also strongly support our plans to bring democratic accountability to policing in London. That will bring strategic control of services such as the police, which are vital to the effective functioning of our capital. It is essential that policing in London is accountable. Previously, as we have heard, the police in London were accountable only to the Home Office and through a patchwork of consultative groups that could not adequately convey the concerns of all groups in the community. The new plans for accountability in London will bring the police even closer to the community. This will greatly enhance the possibilities of promoting partnership with local authorities and local communities, as local experience in my constituency has shown.

Strategic planning in London will also facilitate better co-ordination of crime prevention policies, so that the Metropolitan police can develop the same kind of partnership with the new London authority as the Merton division has developed so well with the council in Merton. I hope that the new authority can also act as a forum for the exchange of best practice. I commend to other areas of London the partnership initiatives in my area.

A Londonwide partnership strategy could be developed for neighbourhood watch schemes. Currently, there is a wide variation between different areas of London in the development of links between local neighbourhood associations and the Metropolitan police. Perhaps it would be a good idea to develop Londonwide guidelines for partnerships between the Metropolitan police, neighbourhood watch groups and similar community groups. That kind of partnership with neighbourhood watch must be set in the context of developing a greater sense of civic responsibility in the local community as a whole.

I firmly believe that partnership between local authorities, community groups and police is the way to restore to communities a sense of civic co-operation that will not only lessen the incidence of crime and disorder but reduce the fear of crime. It will engender the trust that local communities need to progress and will allow necessary urban regeneration to take place in London.

1.14 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): I am surprised that my first point has not been raised in the debate before now. It would be remiss if, in this Parliament's first debate on policing in London, hon. Members did not at least note that the former parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation, Sir Michael Shersby, is no longer with us. We should pay at least passing tribute to his work.

I was extremely disappointed to hear the shadow spokesman, the right hon. Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney), make such a miserable, curmudgeonly and bitter speech. It was not worthy of any Front-Bench spokesman, and certainly not worthy of a significant and serious debate about London. It was notable for its absence of any review of policing in London in the last year, and was a contribution which London policing could have done without. It might also have been useful if the right hon. Gentleman had been in the Chamber to hear my comments.

It is refreshing to have a Home Secretary who is inclined to uphold the law. His predecessor seemed to break the law once a week—sometimes before breakfast—and, more often than not, he showed little respect for policing in London or the wider judicial system. With the greatest respect to my right hon. Friend, the sooner he stops being the police authority for London, the better. A democratically accountable police authority will be better for all concerned.

As hon. Members have said, we did not have annual debates on policing in London in the last Parliament. In fact, we had only three such debates in five years—which, according to the most rudimentary arithmetic, does not equate to annual debates. London expects far more, and we will get that accountability under the new authority. During the last debate on policing in London, the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) claimed that there was accountability. He said:

"That accountability is not, as several Opposition Members have suggested, merely a matter of a once-a-year debate. The Home Secretary and I answer more than 150 letters or questions from hon. Members about the Metropolitan police each year":—[*Official Report*, 5 February 1997; Vol. 271, c. 107.]

[Mr. Tony McNulty]

The sum total of the accountability that the previous Government afforded to Londoners was one debate and 150 letters per year. Everyone would agree that that does not equate to a significant discussion of policing in London.

In the same debate, it was noted—among other things—that more than 3,000 police officers had suffered criminal violence during their duties in the previous year. As hon. Members have said, last month saw the tragic death of Nina Mackay in the east end. We are very well served by the Metropolitan police force and its courageous officers, and I know that the whole House pays tribute to them.

When one reads the transcript of the last couple of debates on policing in London, one is struck by the smugness and complacency of the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard)—it oozes from the page. It is also interesting to see in those transcripts the names of dear, much-lamented people who are no longer with us: Greenway, Merchant and others who are long and happily forgotten. In the 1994 debate, the right hon. and learned Gentleman said—I suppose fairly reasonably—that he envisioned a visible police force, an even safer city with safer streets, more reductions in crime, and flourishing and active participation between the police and the public. That is all very laudable, but, sadly, precious little was achieved in that direction during his tenure as Home Secretary.

Did the former Home Secretary seriously review or analyse that and come back with an adjusted vision by 1996? No. In the debate in 1996, his vision for London was a visible police force, an even safer city with safer streets, more reductions in crime, and flourishing, active partnership between the police and public.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman made virtually the same speech. The stark reality is that he failed miserably as London's police authority. It is a shame that, after the private notice question, he did not stay around to account for his role over the past few years as the police authority for London.

It struck me as rather odd, then, that the former Member for Beckenham said of the previous Home Secretary, in 1994:

"He may not be flavour of the month with the liberal elite, but that runs in his favour because it means that he is clearly in touch with the views and aspirations of ordinary people in this country."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1994; Vol. 250, c. 1489.]

Sadly, I think that Mr. Merchant was wrong then. However, he did not learn any lessons, because in the debate in 1996, he said that the former Home Secretary

"has proved to be the most effective Home Secretary that I can remember."—[*Official Report*, 5 February 1996; Vol. 271, c. 98.]

That says much about the former Member for Beckenham's memory, but even more, I suspect, about his judgment. I hope that the people of Beckenham will show more judgment next Thursday than their former Member of Parliament ever did, certainly on this issue, and, without dwelling on it, other issues as well.

I want to speak in the main about my local police force. I had the pleasure of spending a day with the police force in Harrow. A highlight of the day was giving out divisional superintendent's commendations to police officers who serve in Harrow. I make no apology for speaking of the reasons for those commendations. PC Allan Greig was awarded a commendation for consistently outstanding and professional performance, having made 89 arrests and for submitting more than 80 items of information to the intelligence unit over a six-month period. This is nothing very startling, but it is core, dedicated and professional work over a sustained period.

Two constables, Christopher Lucas and Stephen Landy, were awarded commendations for courage and tenacity in preventing a man who had soaked himself in petrol from committing suicide—quite a daunting task. A drunken man was found pouring the contents of a petrol can on to his head while holding a lighter. The officers wrestled the lighter from him as he continue to pour the petrol, some of which went into PC Landy's eyes. These are outstanding but everyday occurrences for our police, in my borough and throughout London.

Actions in a domestic disturbance earned PCs Graham White and Neil Davidson a commendation, because they effected the arrest of a man armed with a knife. The man threatened and taunted both police officers then shut the door. They noticed that a distressed female was inside the house, forced the door open, restrained the man and arrested him after a struggle.

Sergeant Mark Radford and Ghulam Murtaza worked together diligently in post-event detective work to ensure that a case involving a 90-year-old woman was seen to justice. The woman was taken to hospital after being found injured in her flat. Detailed investigations by both officers established that a known criminal was responsible not only for a burglary in the flat but for committing grievous bodily harm. It was thought unlikely that the suspect, who was subsequently gaoled for seven years, would have been traced or the cases against him proven without the perseverance of the two officers. A sad postscript to that last commendation was that the victim, who was also suffering from senile dementia, subsequently died in hospital.

What struck me when giving the awards to those officers was their reluctance to receive them. These were, perhaps, out-of-the-ordinary events in an otherwise hectic and courageous schedule, but their reluctance to be patted on the back for such commendable work was telling in terms of their professionalism.

Another incident on that day put into context what other hon. Members have said about resources. In the afternoon, I went out with the fast-response unit, not in the usual car, because that was elsewhere, but in their backup car. I recollect that it had 140,000 miles on the clock. The driver said to me, almost in apology, that the car was in a particular state. We were driving round the area and the driver answered a call from the other side of the borough. He put his foot down, put on the blue light and everything else and away we went. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), I thought that travel sickness would be upon me.

Suddenly, however, the car slowed down and then stopped. Unbeknown to me, although I heard a slight noise, the blue light had fallen off the fast-response car and was way back down the road. As the driver bemoaned, highly experienced officers in fast-response cars are putting their lives in their own hands when they

put their foot down and respond to a distress call at 90 or 100 mph. They would like to have some faith in the equipment that they must use. We see what the police have to put up with in both the cameos that I have presented.

The police in Harrow have done commendable work. The curmudgeonly and bitter parts of the shadow Home Secretary's remarks turned on the real and admirable partnerships that have been established over the years by the private sector, local councils and the police, largely at the behest of local councils of whatever political persuasion. To make silly partisan knocks from the Opposition Dispatch Box about what Labour councils have or have not done within partnerships is beneath even a man of the "stature" of the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for North–West Cambridgeshire.

We should applaud all councils for their work with the private sector and local police forces and for all the initiatives that have ensued, ranging from, as in Harrow, the establishment of a youth consultation forum, the members of which go to schools to discuss with pupils, as is only right, the details of policing and self-discipline. These initiatives extend to community safety forums, for example.

We must avoid taking miserly views such as that such and such a council has closed circuit television and it is Labour controlled but perhaps it was under Conservative control when CCTV was introduced. Such heavy dollops of party-political prejudice are not warranted and do not, from the starting point of the debate, help in any way to understand the effectiveness of policing in London.

As a vibrant metropolis, London will always have crime. Such a large city will not be able completely to eradicate it. However, with so many agencies united and working together we can ameliorate the impact of crime. At the same time we can work together to overcome the great fear, or perception, of crime within many communities.

As has been said, we get the police force that reflects society. That being so, we must be mindful of what we do in other areas and of the impact of those actions on the police. It is more than appropriate to mention that in totality many of the Government's proposals for education, housing and welfare to work, as well as for youth justice, reviewing the Crown Prosecution Service and the introduction of a crime and disorder Bill, will represent a real attack on crime while increasing the quality of life of Londoners.

Accountability is crucial, and we know that it will be increased with the dawn, welcomed by the Metropolitan police, of the Greater London authority and a directly accountable police authority. It is time after 18 years to bring the Metropolitan police service back home to the London community. That will be the result of enhanced accountability. By working together, the mayor, the Greater London assembly, the Metropolitan police authority, the Metropolitan police generally, local councils, the voluntary sector, the business community and all communities representing a vibrant and multicultural city will be able to afford the police service and community safety that we all deserve.

The Metropolitan police service is coming home. The new Labour Government recognise the police in London as part of the community and not, as in the 1980s, as a private political army at the beck and call of central Government, or as a body detached from London's people. The force is part and parcel of our city's vibrancy. New Labour will restore confidence to the Metropolitan police and the people of London. That must be done because without the Metropolitan police, with all their courageous officers, there would be chaos and anarchy in our great city. None of us in this Chamber can afford that.

1.29 pm

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I shall first refer briefly to the comments of the shadow Home Secretary, who was kind enough to mention Ealing. He referred to Northolt primary school and Walford high school in connection with closed circuit television. He also spoke about the CCTV programme in Ealing town centre. Sadly, Ealing town centre is not in my constituency: it is on the perimeter and falls within the area so ably represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr. Khabra).

As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) said, the important point about CCTV programmes is that they are partnership schemes. I am as unhappy as he is about attempts to politicise partnerships between local authorities, businesses, including retailers, and local communities, which occur regardless of the political complexion of the borough. It is a shame that hon. Members descended to that level. Such partnerships are a point of pride for many London boroughs, and are at the heart of everything that the new Government are doing, as was shown by the statements by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

I support the police in our capital, and I am constantly grateful for and in awe of the extent of their commitment. I have read the "Report of the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis 1996/97", which we have taken as our text for this morning. Anyone who has read it will recognise immediately the theme that runs right through it: the thin blue line of policing in London is becoming ever thinner. The resource implications delineated in the report are extremely worrying for Londoners. We read again and again of more being done with less. We could get away with that for one or two years, or even three, but the police cannot continue to do more with less without severe cracks appearing in the structure. Yesterday, I spoke to the Commissioner's office, and one of the expressions used was "the seams are now straining."

The report details extraordinary successes. Mention has already been made of the 12 per cent. reduction in burglaries in the period April to October, and of the 5 per cent. drop in street crime. I pay tribute to the officers in Operations Bumblebee and Eagle Eye, which have been so conspicuously successful in our capital city. One statistic that has not been mentioned is the 14,000 tonnes of high explosives that the Metropolitan police recovered in our capital city in the past year. Can hon. Members imagine the effect of 14,000 tonnes of high explosives had they remained in the hands of the terrorist agencies that had doubtless stored them?

Those successes have been achieved in the context of a reduction in staffing in the Metropolitan police service. The present Commissioner took over with a strength of 28,500 men and women. This year he commands 27,000, and we are on line for a figure of fewer than 26,000 next year. I have severe doubts about whether the present conspicuous successes of the Metropolitan police service can be maintained with falling staff numbers.

[Mr. Stephen Pound]

We recognise that resources are a problem in every aspect of government life. My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) referred to Aneurin Bevan's claim that socialism is the language of priorities. In reality, everything is the language of priorities. We have inherited from the previous Government a crisis of funding across the board: in health, education, housing and pensions.

The issue of resources for the Metropolitan police is not just a funding crisis—it is a specific issue for London Members. The funding formula imbalance that penalises London must be addressed. If we, as London Members, achieve nothing else in this Parliament, let us please try to redress that injustice, right that wrong and correct the standard spending assessment formula which is crippling our police service in this capital city. We cannot allow it to continue.

One policing issue has been raised with me more often than any other during my many months as a Member of Parliament—the issue of tenure in the police force. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary referred to that, as did the Commissioner in the annual report, in relation to the management development strategy. The report refers to the wish in the Metropolitan police

"to ensure an equal distribution of resources, skills and experience throughout the MPS; and . . . to provide an interesting and varied career for both existing and potential MPS officers".

An "interesting and varied career" is a worthy aim, and I could understand it if that were the intention of the Met. That description could possibly be applied to the job of a Member of Parliament. I should like to put in a bid to be transferred to, say, Sedgefield in 10 years' time if the majority stays the same. If we are talking about being moved within the ranks, I would say that the Minister for Sport's job looks a little attractive to me. "Interesting and varied" though it would be, I am sure that none of us has any intention of trying to usurp your position, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We would not be so presumptuous.

An "interesting and varied career" is not how it is seen within the Met—quite the contrary. In Ealing, an extraordinarily successful police officer, who has co-ordinated the establishment of more than 150 neighbourhood watches in Ealing, has reached the end of her period of tenure and has been transferred to Hayes. I have nothing against Hayes and Harlington, but we want to keep her in Ealing.

Mr. McDonnell: No transfer fee was involved in this process, I am assured.

Mr. Pound: The officer moved to Hayes police station, rather than Hayes Town football club—despite Hayes Town's great success with Les Ferdinand and the 10 per cent. sell-on deal.

We are losing established police officers who have earned the respect of their local communities. Many officers, against their wishes in many cases—I accept that some may wish to move—are being moved from the area in which they have established their credibility to another part of the city. I have severe doubts and worries about that.

Ealing is covered by two police stations—Southall and Ealing. Sadly, neither is in my constituency, but both are just over the border. I wish to follow the precedent by paying tribute to Superintendent Mike Smythe, the divisional commander at Southall, Superintendent Geoff Bryden, the acting divisional commander at Ealing, and Superintendent Bill Troke-Thomas, who recently retired as divisional commander at Ealing and is now pursuing a career as a fine art expert and picture auctioneer.

One of the reasons for the tenure principle is that it is in the interests of the community and individual police officers. Senior officers have told me that it is a useful management tool to prevent individuals from becoming too complacent in their posts. It was mentioned on one occasion that it may also prevent corruption. If the only way in which we can gee up staff and prevent corruption is by moving them around the capital, that is poor management.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that I was a Metropolitan police officer in the 1960s. I joined the West End Central police station within days of the ink being dry on the Challenor report. I think that everyone deeply regrets that episode in the history of the Metropolitan police. One of the recommendations of the Challenor report was that officers should not be retained overlong in one police district.

Mr. Pound: I remember Sergeant Challenor well and I remember the documentation of the time. The hon. Gentleman is more knowledgeable in that area than I am, but I recall that that recommendation about moving officers applied to the CID and to specific sections within the Metropolitan police service. It did not apply to the entire uniformed force. We are not faced with a response to Challenor and West End Central: the matter affects every serving police officer and I am worried about that.

We sometimes hark back to a golden age of policing. Those of us who work in Norman Shaw South are in the old New Scotland Yard building, which is perhaps appropriate for old new Labour Members like me. Sometimes as we walk along the corridors of that building in which Crippen was interviewed, not, I am told, by the Whips but by the Commissioner of the day, perhaps we mentally clothe ourselves in trench coats and snap-brimmed trilbies. In our imagination we hear the silver bells on the black Wolseleys as they roar through Derby gate with Lockhart and Fabian who are there to protect the country.

I fondly remember as a young lad at Fulham football club seeing off-duty police officers standing at the Hammersmith end watching the silky skills and graceful play of Johnny Haynes and Tosh Chamberlain. I called my father's attention to the large number of officers at the Hammersmith end and he said to me, "Don't worry son, you are quite safe. They are all off duty." My father had recently had an unfortunate experience with a pound and a half of pork sausages. Meat rationing was still in force and he felt that he had been set up by the sausage squad. He subsequently changed his view of the local police. I do not know whether that was a mythical golden age, but I recollect police officers being part of the community. They knew one's parents and sometimes one's grandparents and, in time, they knew one's children. They were locally based, and those were the days before tenure.

Every day we ask more and more of our police. We no longer ask them to react to crime and see to crime prevention: we ask them to be agents of social change and

control. We require police to go into housing estates to undertake work that we do not have the right to ask them to do. Parliamentarians must respond to those issues and address the matter of resourcing the Metropolitan police service.

Hon. Members who know far more about the subject than I do have made the case for funding. I associate myself with them and with the comments throughout the debate, which has been extremely positive. It has recognised the debt that we Londoners owe to our police service. I have confidence in the words of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that the Government will be worthy of the trust and faith that the police service shows in us. We shall reciprocate.

1.43 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I add my praise to the Metropolitan police. Brent is the most multicultural and diverse area in Europe. Therefore, I especially welcome the Government's proposal to institute a distinct offence of racially motivated assault. In passing, I say that I especially welcome it because it may make life somewhat more peaceful in Brent town hall, where, recently, Conservative Councillor Peter Golds was reported to the police for attempting to strangle his fellow Conservative, of Irish extraction, Councillor Sayers, on the ground that he had attended a twinning ceremony in Dublin. I am sure, however, that that is not the legislation's purpose.

On a more serious note, I want to share with the House an example of best practice from the police division in Brent, which has forged links with the local community and introduced a scheme whereby it has trained with, and raised funds for, a group of about 15 children from seven different ethnic communities.

Last year, the police took, in their own free time of course, the group to canoe some 250 miles down a previously unnavigated river in north India. This year, they are meeting an even greater challenge and taking the group up Mount Kilimanjaro. In those ways, the police are working with the local community in my constituency and, in particular, allowing young people from a huge range of ethnic backgrounds to live together and to face a challenge together.

Last year, I met those young people when they reported on the success of their trip. Each one said that they had benefited not simply from the adventure, but by learning how different members of different communities worked and lived together and co-operated. That is a fine example of the way in which the police force in Brent has been a glue and a catalyst for a wonderful community initiative. I ask my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to join me in congratulating Brent police force on its work.

I echo the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) and for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) on London's funding problems.

The remarks of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) related in particular to the stadium in his constituency. In Brent borough, we have Wembley stadium, so the local police force suffers particularly from the strains that are engendered by the huge crowds and the national importance of the national stadium. That will increase when the new national stadium is built, as the Government want not only the World cup in 2006, but, we hope, further events such as the Commonwealth and Olympic games to be based around the stadium.

It is undeniable that not simply having the national stadium, but being the force of the capital city, with all the other work that is associated with that, is a huge drain on the Metropolitan police and is at the cost of the local community and local policing, so I urge the Home Secretary to say whether, under the new Metropolitan police authority, the precepting formula may also be reappraised.

What is the measure of effectiveness by which our police force is judged? It is the detection rate—the number of crimes solved—instead of the measure elsewhere in the world, which is the direction in which the crime rate is moving.

While it is vital to solve crimes, it is of little comfort to people who have suffered assaults or those looking at the devastation in their burgled homes to know that the crime may be solved and the criminal brought to justice. It would be far better to assess our police force not on its capacity to solve crimes, but on the crime prevention rate and the reduction in the number of crimes.

The Government should consider changing the measure by which we judge our police and bring it in line with other countries. We should look at the crime prevention rate and judge the police as effective when the number of crimes diminishes.

1.50 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I shall respond first to the comments of the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner). Earlier, the Home Secretary reminded us of the origins of the Metropolitan police and, in particular, the 1829 days of Sir Robert Peel. Anyone who joins the police still has drummed into him by rote the same phrase that he used, and which I had to learn by rote in 1965—the primary object of an efficient police is the prevention of crime. After that come crime detection and the punishment of offenders. The hon. Member for Brent, North did the House a great service in reminding us of that.

You, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will understand how I feel today. I cannot think of a time when a former officer of the Metropolitan police has stood at the Dispatch Box and made a speech in a debate on the policing of London. It is a great honour to do so. I should mention also that I was once a vice-chairman of a police authority in the north of England.

With my background, it is always a pleasure to debate police issues. However, while listening to a lively and constructive debate, with hon. Members on both sides speaking vigorously on behalf of their constituencies, I could not help wondering why we were having this debate today. There has already been one debate on London since the election. In addition, the Home Secretary said that in a matter of weeks he would announce the funding formula for London and for the police throughout England and Wales. We wait with bated breath in North Yorkshire to find out whether the increases that we have had over recent years, as a result of changes in the formula nationally, will continue.

Would it not have made more sense if we had waited for the debate until after the funding formula had been announced? We could then have assessed the generosity of provision. I should mention that I do not make any criticism of the special pleading from hon. Members on both sides of the House—in many ways, that is what

[Mr. John Greenway]

Parliament is for. I reached the conclusion that it was as well to hold the debate now because I anticipate that when the Home Secretary makes his budget announcement we will find that the actual cash awarded to the police will be in stark contrast to some of the rhetoric that we heard from Labour Members in debates such as this when they were in opposition. There will be no extra money.

The Home Secretary told us also that there will be a comprehensive spending review—but we knew that. I do not think that anyone should be in any doubt—certainly no one in the police service is in any doubt—that the comprehensive spending review has as its objective discovering the extent to which the Home Office budget can be pared. It would be surprising if the objective were different.

As my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary said, since the new Government were elected, not only has there been no new money for police, but—because of inflation higher than 1 per cent.—in real terms, the spending already allocated by the previous Government will be less.

If I do nothing else in my speech, I want to nail the lie that the Labour party is somehow stuck with the previous Government's public expenditure plans for the next two to three years. It is the Government's choice to stick to whatever figure for police spending was in the Red Book. It is their choice, not ours.

I want also to make some facts clear about officer numbers and expenditure. There is no point in spending the next couple of years in a sterile debate over those matters when the figures speak for themselves. During this debate, I have obtained figures from the Library showing that, in 1997–98, net expenditure on policing in London alone has been £1.768 billion. In real terms, the equivalent figure for 1979–80 was £1,057 million. Therefore, in real terms, the Conservatives spent £700 million more on the police service in London in one year. That is what happened under the previous Government's 18 years of stewardship, and we should keep it clearly in mind.

Let us also face up to what has happened in the past 12 months. The hon. Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill) got it right when he talked about changes to the funding formula. In the national distribution of money, funding formulae are always changing. As I said before he returned to the Chamber, I suspect that, because of competing demands from different parts of the country, the Home Secretary is likely to continue that practice.

I make no secret of the fact that, in North Yorkshire, we are very pleased that, over the past couple of years, we have received an increase of more than 4 per cent. One of the consequences of the formula change, however, has been that London has received a bit less, despite a real-terms increase nationally.

The question that hon. Members want the Home Secretary to answer—in his statement, if not today—is what he will do about that consequence. If the Home Secretary is to give more money to London and abide by the overall spending ceiling—as, today, he has reconfirmed that he will do—he will have to get that money from somewhere else. I do not envy him the task, because it will not be easy.

When Labour Members talk about the figures, however, I wish that they would face up to reality. If they want more money in London, from where will it come? Which other parts of the country will suffer to provide the money? Conversely, will the Home Secretary tell us that he is kicking down the door of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that, in the circumstances, the police will get more money? It has to be one or the other.

Mr. McDonnell: Now that the hon. Gentleman has finally admitted that the previous Government reduced the overall proportion of resources coming to London, will he justify it, given that, in terms of taxation, London is a net contributor to the rest of the country to the tune of between £6 billion and £9 billion?

Mr. Greenway: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will join us in the debate on net contributions that we are likely to have in the next few months—net contributions not only from London but from England to Scotland and Wales. We can all argue about what is fair, but my point is that, no matter how we divide the cake, there will always be winners and losers. London won year after year, but perhaps it has not done quite so well in the past year.

I take this opportunity to nail another lie relating to how many extra or how many fewer officers or police constables there are. Following my exchange with the Home Secretary during the most recent Home Office questions, I tabled a written question which was answered by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael). He confirmed that between April 1992 and March 1997, the number of constables increased by 2,322. He then pointed out that overall police numbers fell by 469.

The issue is clarified in the first report of the Metropolitan police committee, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) set up a year or two ago. It shows that between March 1994 and March 1996, the number of ACPO rank officers in the Metropolitan police force fell from 47 to 34, a cut of 13; the number of chief inspectors and superintendents fell by 241; and the number of chief inspectors and above fell by 255. It is in those ranks that the numbers fell, and that is true across the country. Is the Labour party saying that, in the drive for efficiency on which it has now embarked, there is no room for dispensing with highly paid senior officers in management posts when the public want more officers on the street? Let us have no more talk about whether the previous Government were truly committed to the police service—everyone knows that they were—but we can all argue that, in an ideal world, we would like to do more.

In no other country is the image of the policeman more closely associated with its capital city than in Britain. I am not going to pass an opinion on which of the many television programmes over the years have most accurately projected the true image of the London bobby.

The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) got it right when he said that every day we ask more of our police. Having been a policeman, I know that the job is infinitely more difficult and dangerous now than it was in my time 30 years ago. There has been adequate reference—if there ever can be adequate reference—to that fact in today's debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) reminded us of the

number of assaults on police officers, and the House has paid tribute again to the bravery and courage of WPC Nina Mackay. We have also considered what makes the London bobby so special—it is his good humour.

In an intervention, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) mentioned Euro 96 and the policing of major high-profile events in the capital city when our police do us proud. I was reminded of the stark contrast between the policing of football in this country and the scenes that we saw from Rome only a few weeks ago. People in this country and throughout the world know that.

The London policeman provides reassurance when he is seen on patrol. The strategy for high-visibility policing—which has reached 61 per cent., against a 60 per cent. target over the past year—is working and should be continued. However, we delude ourselves if we think that merely putting police officers on the streets will to prevent crime. It will help, as the hon. Member for Brent, North said, but it is not the solution to tackling much of the organised crime in the capital and the rest of the country. Operation Bumblebee has been successful largely because of the use of intelligence and the targeting of known suspects. That trend is likely to be developed further in the coming years.

Closed circuit television cameras also play a vital role. Partnerships with local authorities and business have been very successful, but a core element of that partnership is funding from national Government. The Government's continued refusal and failure to make clear where they stand on that gives the lie to their determination to stamp out rowdyism, loutish behaviour and crime in the streets of our cities.

Almost uniquely, the powers given by Parliament to the police to carry out their tasks are invested not in chief police officers, senior management or even, dare I say, the police authority—whether it be the Home Secretary or a police committee—but in the office of police constable. We have talked a great deal about policing objectives and new strategies for dealing with specific problems such as burglary, car crime, robberies, street violence and drugs, as well as the continuing threat of terrorism. The remedies to those problems lie in the qualities of individual police officers—their professionalism, their integrity, their dedication, their commitment and, all too frequently, their courage and determination. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) also reminded us of their voluntary work, especially with young people. Those are the qualities that count the most. That is why the police service has always needed to recruit well-motivated men and women of the highest calibre.

Success in that has varied over the years. There are growing grounds for concern that the police service, especially in London, is beginning to experience a fall in the quality of recruits. The Commissioner's annual report, which has rightly been much discussed today, says that during 1996–97, of the nearly 4,000 individuals who applied to join the Metropolitan police, only 692 were recruited. That is partly a resource issue, but we should also bear in mind the fact that 80 per cent. of those who applied were not considered suitable.

As recently as two years ago, the Commissioner said that there was no problem with attracting recruits of a good educational standard. Indeed, he said that there was a backlog of applicants. The Police Federation now believes that the standard of applicants is starting to fall. It would be a great pity if the police service could not attract people with the educational attainment and aptitude that the service demands if it is to achieve its full potential in serving the community.

Pay and conditions are clearly important factors, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet mentioned. We shall return to those issues. However, there are other factors that can detract from the appeal of a police career. Several hon. Members have referred to their concerns about the continued failure of the police to recruit sufficient numbers from the ethnic minorities. That is a continuing problem which we must address.

People from ethnic minorities will not join the police if they believe that they will be subject to racial bias and abuse. Similarly, many women are put off a police career by fear of sexual harassment. That fear has recently been reinforced by a number of high-profile industrial tribunal and court cases.

The efforts made by senior officers, especially the Commissioner, are well documented; time does not allow me to go into the matter in the detail that I should have liked. I advise hon. Members who are concerned about the matter, however, to look not just at the Metropolitan police report, but at the annual report of the Police Complaints Authority. It is not only racial bias within the police service that is a concern. There is also concern about the behaviour of a handful of police officers towards ethnic minorities. That problem has been, and continues to be, sensitively handled.

Instituting change through the command structure and disciplinary action is not always the best approach. We need to consider a forcewide reappraisal and development of personnel management policy and procedures. In that respect, a complete change of culture within the police service, through the development of personal skills and the creation of a framework for the assessment of individual behaviour and attitude of officers in all situations, may be needed. Aggressive behaviour, poor communication, the pursuit of personal agendas rather than the wider objectives of the force and failure to support colleagues are all examples of negative behaviour which is unacceptable in all situations and not just where racial or sexual discrimination may arise.

The force has begun to make some progress through the London beat proposals; again, time does not allow us to go into those proposals. Like the Home Secretary, I await the outcome of the inquiry by the Home Affairs Select Committee into police disciplinary matters. I share his concern, however, that the police service today attracts many more malicious and mischievous complaints. We must be careful to give our police officers the support they deserve.

In spite of the dangers and difficulties that we have heard about again today and despite the increasing demands made on it, the police service throughout London has had remarkable success in recent years in its efforts to reduce crime. Reported notifiable offences are 100,000 fewer than four years ago. That means at least 100,000 fewer victims. The police seek to ensure that our capital and the surrounding areas are safe places in which to live, to work and to visit. We wish them well in that task.

2.12 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Alun Michael): The remarks by the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) were appropriate for bringing us to the end of the best debate on policing I have heard during my time in the House. I have my own reasons for feeling a keen sense of the privilege of speaking in this debate and of sharing in part the responsibilities of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary as the police authority for London.

My first knowledge of London was a week's holiday each year with my Uncle Bob in Barnet. Each year, I saw at first hand the pressures on police officers and their families as my Uncle Bob moved up to become Detective Chief Inspector Bob Roberts in the flying squad. He also served as a police officer in this House and I was proud to bring him here as a guest for my mother's 80th birthday.

My point is that the police officers who serve us in our capital city are men and women with families who also pay a price for the service we are given. Sometimes, that is a price paid at the hands of violence, as a number of hon. Members have said today. They also have the pressures of a demanding job and we should pay tribute to them.

There are special and difficult challenges that are peculiar to London. The city's boroughs, divisions and local communities nevertheless demonstrate some fine examples of police work, partnership initiatives and fresh thinking, which retain the finest traditions of the British police. For all its problems, the police service in London frequently provides lessons for other forces and other countries.

It has been a real pleasure to listen to this debate and to hear so many new Labour Members speak with knowledge and passion about policing in their local areas. I welcome the shadow Home Secretary's promise of a bipartisan approach to racism and racial violence in particular. His comment was endorsed by the junior shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ryedale. It is also important that the police should know that they have the support and encouragement of us all, and that has been expressed by every hon. Member who has spoken today.

The shadow Home Secretary referred to CS gas. We recently saw an excellent report by Her Majesty's chief inspector of constabulary on police safety, which stressed that training and other arrangements, including first aid, needed to be of the highest possible standard. The Commissioner is approaching the issue systematically and responsibly. At the annual conference of the Police Superintendents Association a couple of years ago, I saw an experiment with pepper gas. It made a vivid impression on many people, as the officer who agreed to be a guinea pig—he raised money for charity in so doing—was felled by a single squirt and it looked horrific. Only two hours later, however, I had a conversation with him, although his eyes were still streaming. It is much better to allow someone to go through a period of pain for a few hours than to restrain that person from activity as a result of a shot or other physical injury, which happens far too often.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, it is important to consider the use of CS gas in a balanced way—it has been examined extremely carefully in terms of medical evidence, not only here but in other countries—rather than be driven by one or two cases. None the less, cases that go wrong need to be considered seriously.

I endorse the point that the shadow Home Secretary made about thank-you letters. As hon. Members know, when people take the effort to write such letters, that gives real pleasure. When we receive those rather than the usual letters, it gives us a boost. Our police officers so often deserve thanks that the shadow Home Secretary is right to use that as a measure of merit and of the standards that they offer us.

Finally among the issues on which I wish to agree with the shadow Home Secretary, I endorse his comment about Crimestoppers and remind hon. Members of the number—0800 555111. I regret, however, that the shadow Home Secretary spoiled his speech, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) said, by rehearsing a series of extracts from the Conservative central office handbook of meaningless rhetoric. I know that he has had a difficult job. His Government failed on crime during their period in office and few of his hon. Friends turned up today to support him. Indeed, the Conservatives ran out of speakers. We shall take no lessons from the Conservative party on financial planning. The Conservatives massively overspent the budget available for closed circuit television in a pre-election spree, and failed to allow for the future, as they did on so many other issues. We shall do what we can with the inheritance that they left us while staying within the spending limits pledged by the Chancellor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) was right to criticise the shadow Home Secretary's comments on police numbers. The reference to an increase of 1,000 in police strength was skated over quickly by the shadow Home Secretary in his intervention on my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, because he clearly did not know his facts.

In his response to my hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), the right hon. Gentleman spoke of resources—total finance. That is extremely sensible, but it is not the measure that the Conservatives chose to make the indicator of success or failure. The total number of police officers in the Metropolitan police is a reasonable measure.

The hon. Member for Ryedale wriggled on that issue. We understand that Opposition Members have a preference for speaking about constables, but they should remember that, when the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) was Home Secretary, he set the aim of shaking out senior officers in order to put them back on the streets.

The overall number is the measure of effectiveness chosen not by the Labour party, but by the Conservative party in the persons of the then Prime Minister and the then Home Secretary in the run-up to the 1992 general election. In 1992, the base figure was 28,154 in London. In that year, the Prime Minister promised an increase of 1,000 police officers, so there should have been an increase of 225 officers in the Metropolitan police. Instead, there was a cut of 287, which left the total number 500 short of the promise. A further 168 officers were cut the following year. By 1997, the number was down to 27,185—1,194 short of the Conservatives' 1992 general election pledge. One must go back 10 years to find a lower number of police officers.

I give those figures to illustrate the record of the Conservatives on the measure that they chose. It is true that the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 put the

matter in the hands of chief officers, rather than of the Home Secretary. In London and elsewhere, it is the duty of the Government to provide the resources and work with the police to fight crime. It is the job of chief police officers, with their police authorities, to decide how to use those resources.

With an air of increasing desperation, the shadow Home Secretary went on to offer the absurd proposition that a Labour Government would put partnership at risk. Our proposals in legislation, and our encouragement through the Home Secretary's key objectives, are not seen as a threat by the police, local authorities or the local communities, who want crime to be cut in their areas.

Yes, there are many examples of good voluntary partnerships in London, such as in King's Cross, and many outside London, especially in Labour-led local authorities. We praised people for the voluntary partnerships that have been formed over the past few years, since the publication in 1991 of the Morgan report which recommended such partnerships, but that report was left gathering dust on the shelf for six years by a Government who failed to enter into that spirit of partnership. Police and local authorities begged the previous Government to act and to make that a statutory responsibility.

We want to move on. Partnership works, but it must be approached efficiently and effectively. There is a lack of consistency. The partnerships that exist frequently lack clear analysis and precise targets, which we will give them to help them to plan and act locally.

We will put our plans in legislation. We have put our proposals in my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's key objectives. The shadow Home Secretary's own Conservative Back Benchers seem to want an acceleration of the partnership approach. In effect, we are turning a patchwork of voluntary projects into a consistent strategy, in which the local need and the local partners drive the action to cut crime where it happens—at a local borough and division level. Clearly, that is driving local authorities and the police in London, as we see from so many excellent examples. That is why our approach is welcomed—for example, by some of those concerned with policing in outer London.

Many concerns were expressed during the debate, not all of which I will be able to address in the time available. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North raised the question of tenure. The purpose of tenure is to ensure that the expertise at present invested in specialist units is more widely shared among uniformed patrol officers and that no officer becomes so specialised that he is unable to perform the primary policing function of uniformed patrol. The Commissioner's intention is to spread the skills of specialist officers to police stations around London, so that they are not locked into a narrow specialism, squad or division for their entire careers. It is meant to open up opportunities. The policy is causing difficulty for some officers in some areas who do not welcome it. The Commissioner assures us that he will introduce the changes gradually and that assistant commissioners are willing to consider cases where they are argued in the interests of policing in a particular local area.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale), understood what we are trying to do with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's key objectives and with legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ann Keen) demonstrated the same understanding. I visited her constituency before the election, and have done so since. On the second occasion, I was delighted to see that the work that she undertook before the election with the police, business and local government to tackle youth crime has now come to fruition.

We cannot compel virtue and we cannot compel that partnerships be entered into with a true and genuine spirit—they must be worked at. However, we can create the right framework of law and process to help accelerate crime-cutting work and improve the effectiveness of partnerships. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend is clearly determined to do that.

Several hon. Members referred to areas outside the London boroughs and found our partnership proposals reassuring. We shall consider what has been said, but the authority requires commensurate representation. Outer-London areas will have the chance to be part of the local partnership approach involving those areas, districts and the Metropolitan police.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) stressed the importance of sensitivity and of achieving community participation in police activities and community safety. She is absolutely correct. I share her pleasure at the success of the Lambeth guns amnesty to date. She referred also to deaths in police custody. The Commissioner is giving that important issue the attention that it deserves, and we shall respond as positively as possible. My hon. Friend is aware of the current consideration, and I am sure that she will accept our assurance that we take such matters seriously. The Home Secretary wrote to Mike Franklin, the chair of the Lambeth community police consultative group, on 15 September to provide a formal response. The Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into police complaints and discipline will bring forward several matters that we shall address when we see the report.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) referred to the increase in social unease. I agree with my hon. Friends that we have inherited many problems from the previous Government, but it is important that we get it right. Several hon. Members referred to the impact of pensions on police budgets. It would take some £20 billion to create a funded scheme in England and Wales, and London's share of that sum would be well in excess of £4 billion. There is no easy answer that does not involve drawing finances from elsewhere. We made that point when we asked the previous Government to deal with the issue, but they have left it for us to tackle—as several Opposition Members seemed willing to acknowledge.

Sir Brian Mawhinney: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Michael: I have only a few minutes in which to try to deal with all the issues covered by a range of hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) referred to the death of "Ricky" Reel. I know that the Metropolitan police will take account of my hon. Friend's comments in their ongoing investigation and will provide any further information about that death.

[Mr. Michael]

It is clearly important that the police work closely with relatives. However, the case is currently under consideration and still awaiting a coroner's inquest.

Many contributions from both sides—to which I should love to be able to refer in detail—reflected a common theme of the police and local community working together. I welcome that approach, particularly from so many new Members of Parliament. The formula for finances to which I have referred requires greater transparency and more predictability. If they know where they are from one year to the next, the police can plan for the future. We will consider that. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will say more about it shortly.

The hon. Member for Ryedale asked why we were having this debate. It is to debate the Commissioner's report on last year. We will debate the financing of the police for London and all the other areas of the country, including the hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine, in the very near future. I welcome the way in which he summed up his speech, and his emphasis on the very positive contribution made by the police. It is the responsibility of the police to keep the peace. Catching criminals is important, but keeping the peace and reducing crime are the objectives which we should share with them, and the objectives which all colleagues should share with the Commissioner—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, pursuant to the Standing Order.

FINANCE AND SERVICES COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Peter Ainsworth, Sir Sydney Chapman, Mr. Eric Clarke, Mr. Thomas McAvoy, Dr. Lewis Moonie, Mr. George Mudie, Mrs. Marion Roe, Mr. Paul Tyler, Mr. Dennis Turner and Mr. Dave Watts be members of the Finance and Services Committee.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

Hospitals (South-West London)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Robert Ainsworth.]*

2.30 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to raise a matter of crucial importance to my constituents.

Although the state of local hospital services has been an issue of concern in Kingston and Surbiton for some time, the current London hospital review and the south-west London review have brought matters to a head. This debate therefore is extremely topical, and the Minister's reply will be much studied by all who care about the health service in south-west London.

I am delighted to see my hon. Friends the Members for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) and for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) in their places. I know that they wish to let the Minister know of their concerns—and those of their constituents—in their parts of south-west London.

I should like to place it on record that the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) wanted to be here today to make similar points, but other pressing engagements have prevented them from attending.

The previous Government bear a heavy responsibility for the pressures and difficulties faced by hospitals in south-west London. Not only do we suffer from the underfunding that was the hallmark of Conservative NHS policy, but innumerable reviews, followed by indecision, have left a legacy of uncertainty and doubt over the future of some hospital services, in particular Queen Mary's hospital in Roehampton.

Uncertainty always causes problems in any institution: staff wonder whether their jobs are safe, many leave, morale sinks and, in a hospital setting, patient care is inevitably put at risk. In the Conservatives' NHS, with the chaos of the internal market, such uncertainty has proved even more damaging. Neighbouring trusts look at nearby hospitals with a question mark over their future and wonder whether they can increase their own income by appropriating some of the threatened hospital's patients. Trained staff are wooed. GPs are contacted. Press releases are sent out. Instead of a rational, planned NHS, we have a chaotic, anarchic one. An uncertain situation becomes an unstable situation.

Queen Mary's hospital, Roehampton is experiencing just such problems with staffing. On general medical wards, the vacancy rate is currently between 40 and 50 per cent., compared with a typical rate of just 20 per cent. Of those vacancies, 70 per cent. are filled by nursing staff who have some knowledge of the hospital. However, 30 per cent. are filled with agency nurses who do not, which is not satisfactory for the hospital management.

The new Government have now to deal with this inherited mess. Indeed, they have started. They have set up the London hospital review and have found at least a little more money for the NHS. We welcome both steps, although the Minister will not be surprised to hear that we wanted more spent on the health service for this year and next.

My aim in seeking this debate was not, however, to focus on the reviews or the argument over NHS spending.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the 1.35 per cent. increase

provided to Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority is inadequate and will lead to cuts in community health care services such as foot care and continence care, which will simply store up greater costs for the future both in the NHS or shunt costs on to social services? Does he agree that that represents a false economy?

Mr. Davey: I agree with my hon. Friend and I share his concerns. I am aware of the cuts that have been experienced by the local health authority in his constituency, which are similar to those that have been experienced in mine. We shall be grateful if the Minister will comment.

My primary objective is to focus attention on the transition period before Ministers can implement fully the decisions that they will take after the review and consultation period ends. I am especially concerned about patient safety during the transition period. I hope that the Minister will be able to give the House and my constituents assurances on patient safety when he replies.

I shall detail the problem. Hospital services at Queen Mary's have been in decline for some time. Local health authorities, faced with severe financial problems caused by the previous Government, have been forced to reconfigure services away from the hospital. There has been increasing concern that patient care in some services is no longer adequate at Queen Mary's.

The royal colleges have already withdrawn accreditation from Queen Mary's for the training of junior doctors in the accident and emergency department both as a result of financial pressures and as a result of new research that shows that patient care is vastly improved by specialisation, which requires large clinical teams—which are currently not available at Queen Mary's.

The danger now is that the royal colleges will withdraw accreditation from Queen Mary's in other areas, including general medicine. If they do that, junior doctors will not be able to train at the hospital. With no junior doctors, many key hospital services will be forced to close. The consequent loss of beds to the local hospital service would be large. It would be extremely difficult for nearby hospitals to cope, especially if they were not given adequate time to prepare. I understand from medical staff locally that there is a serious possibility, verging on certainty, that the royal colleges will withdraw accreditation from Queen Mary's next August. That is the key date that Ministers must bear in mind.

Whatever the outcome of the review of hospital services in south-west London, whatever the consultation process produces and whatever decisions are made by Ministers, the royal colleges' decision on accreditation is likely to go ahead from August next year.

It could be argued that Ministers could still pre-empt the royal colleges with oodles of cash to turn round services. Indeed, many of us would like to see significant injections of cash to do just that. My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park has campaigned furiously for many years for just that to happen. Liberal Democrats throughout the region have supported such campaigns, but will such moneys be forthcoming now? They should, but when we are debating patient safety there is no other place to live than in the real world of the Chancellor's published spending plans. The right hon. Gentleman's current plans provide no scope for the type of sums that would be required.

If the Minister is so minded, however, I hope that he will confirm that Queen Mary's will not close and that even under current spending plans this historic hospital will continue to provide vital and modern hospital services—even if he is unable to guarantee sufficient funds to restore it to its former glory.

The proposal in the south-west London review to continue hospital services at Queen Mary's should be seen as the very minimum, given current spending plans, that Ministers should support. The key issue is that if substantial new sums are not provided after the review, the royal colleges are virtually certain to withdraw accreditation next August. That would mean a huge reduction in the number of hospital beds in south-west London from that date.

Faced with that possibility and the real danger to patients' lives that would ensue, it is incumbent on health managers and health Ministers to plan to reduce or eliminate the risk of massive, destructive and dangerous bed shortages next summer.

Local hospital managers at Kingston have drawn up contingency plans. They have worked out precisely how they could provide temporary additional beds as quickly as possible. Those beds would be needed if Kingston had to meet the demand that would follow if Queen Mary's lost its accreditation, but even these plans would take 26 weeks to implement.

Hospital managers cannot even begin to implement such contingency plans until the end of the three-month statutory consultation period in February or March next year. There could be a judicial review if the Minister pre-judged the review and acted earlier, even if the need for contingency plans has been sparked off by the likely actions of the royal colleges rather than by the review.

A 26-week lead-in time for the provision of temporary beds starting from the end of February would take us to August, which is just when the beds crisis is forecast to blow up. Will the beds be ready by August? Perhaps. Maybe. If there is no slippage, or if nothing goes wrong. That is the nub of my concern: perhaps is not good enough. Lives could be put at risk if beds were not available. We should not run our health service in that way.

My main request is simple. Will the Minister ensure that proper contingency plans are in place and will be given Government backing, financial or otherwise, if their implementation proves to be necessary after the reviews? Will he ensure that such plans can be implemented before August if necessary?

I am delighted to inform the Minister that the local Conservative-controlled neighbourhood committee has acted responsibly: last night, it gave planning consent to the hospital's proposals for a temporary beds unit. All local parties are acting responsibly to ensure that the potential risks are tackled. I hope that the Minister, on behalf of the Government and the Labour party, will assure the House that he will play his part, so that no major reduction in beds at Queen Mary's will occur unless and until alternative facilities are open at Kingston hospital and ready to meet the demands of the locality.

Will the Minister detail for me as clearly as possible the timetable for receipt of the reviews and the subsequent consultation period and the timing of announcements of decisions following consultation? Will he assure me that his diary and those of his ministerial colleagues will be

[Mr. Davey]

cleared for the days directly after the end of the consultation period so that they can give their urgent and undivided attention to these decisions? Decisions should be implemented and any necessary transitional arrangements should be established as soon as possible.

Will the Minister prevail on the Secretary of State to ensure that if a few decisions prove extremely difficult following the consultation, they will not be allowed to delay other decisions that hospital managers will need to be taken to prepare transitional arrangements? I cannot overemphasise the time factor. If we are to avoid a potential catastrophe some time next year, Kingston hospital must be supported so that it can provide enough temporary beds within an extremely limited time frame.

Finally, I urge the Minister, when he and his colleague consider the reviews, to back the case for major capital investment at Kingston hospital. It is a superb hospital. It serves a population of more than 300,000: it currently has 440 beds with a full range of diagnostic and treatment services and clinical support. It achieves one of the highest levels of day surgery care in the country and has introduced changes to create larger specialist teams, as required by the royal collages and as recommended in the Calman report, but Kingston hospital's buildings can no longer cope. Even if no patients were transferred to it from other hospitals as a result of decisions taken following the reviews, there would still be an urgent need for major capital build, such as a new accident and emergency wing, expansion of the maternity unit and new elective surgery units, to name but three.

The staff at Kingston hospital are tremendous. They perform magnificently, often under pressure. The management is innovative and committed to the best for the NHS. Will the Minister therefore give me an assurance that Kingston hospital has his backing and that it has a major role to play in south-west London in the long term?

Mr. Roger Casale (Wimbledon): I know Kingston hospital well. It is close to my constituency and my mother worked there for many years, playing a small part in contributing to the fine reputation it now enjoys. Many of my constituents use Kingston hospital and I am aware of the knock-on effect of potential further closures at Queen Mary's. Will the hon. Member applaud the fact that the Government have immediately given £12 million to Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth health authority—considerably more than could have been expected under the previous Government's projections? Is it not now the task of local Members of Parliament in that health authority area, which includes my constituency and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. This is an Adjournment debate in which time is limited. The hon. Gentleman ought to stop there.

Mr. Davey: Of course new money is welcome, but there will still be a financial deficit in that health authority next year which will cause problems. The Government have a problem. They have to pick up the pieces left by their predecessors. I wish them well, but I urge them to realise that, in south-west London, they must act promptly and decisively if patient safety is to be maintained next year.

2.45 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The previous Government should die with "Queen Mary's" etched on their collective heart, and I am grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to say that in the House of Commons. Queen Mary's is a spacious site and was once a fine hospital with easy access from all parts of south-west London and the suburbs.

The previous Government chose to build that white elephant the Chelsea and Westminster hospital in central London, where it was not needed, and ignored the potential of the Queen Mary's site and that hospital's links with the Westminster hospital. The previous Government's internal market followed and went in for the kill. The stronger management at Kingston hospital—which is also excellent—got the contracts for treatment.

Queen Mary's is now operating at what many of my colleagues consider to be dangerous levels and cannot continue in its present form beyond next August. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said, we need new facilities for out-patients and minor casualty and respite beds and we desperately need more beds and facilities at Kingston hospital. If we do not get them, not only will patients suffer, but the royal colleges—which appear to be the new NHS dictators—will say that the facilities at Kingston are inadequate and will withdraw accreditation from Kingston as well. Another fine hospital in south-west London will be lost and patients will suffer. I beg the Minister to listen and to act.

2.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Paul Boateng): This has been a worthwhile debate and has involved more contributors than is normal for an Adjournment debate. It has been helpful that there has been unanimity across the Chamber between Liberal Democrat and Labour Members on an issue of obvious concern to constituency Members of Parliament and to my Department. Conspicuous by their absence are representatives of the Tory party, who must take the lion's share of blame for the situation that exists in south-west London.

The House owes the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) a debt of gratitude for bringing this matter before us. I commend him and others—including my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) and, of course, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge)—for raising the matter in the past with my hon. Friend the Minister of State.

The problems have not appeared overnight—we know their origins and have heard them discussed today. They have led to a situation in which the health service has been fragmented and in which south-west London has been put in a difficult position as a result of decisions made by the last Government. We have inherited a poisoned legacy in this regard, and we must build on the undoubted consensus that exists among those who represent south-west London, among its people and among the dedicated hard-working national health service staff to maintain the expertise, commitment and historic traditions of service to local people in these facilities. By building on that we should ensure that we create a health service of which we can be justifiably proud.

I welcome the frank debate on these issues in local communities. We have been anxious to ensure that we are a listening Government. That is why my right hon. Friend

the Secretary of State for Health visited local hospitals in the summer to learn at first hand about the problems. He discussed the issues fully and frankly with clinicians, staff and the unions and with representatives of the local community, including the League of Friends of Queen Mary's. I pay special tribute to its voluntary effort on behalf of the hospital.

We acted. We provided extra money for both health and social services, to ensure that local services were strengthened, particularly at Kingston hospital where pressure was already building as a result of the interim measures that were taken locally in April to maintain clinically safe services. Genuine consultation is now under way to establish the best way forward for long-term services in south-west London. We are committed to the integrity of that consultation, and that imposes a real discipline on Ministers because we must ensure that nothing that we say or do prejudges the outcome of that consultation.

It is important to consider in more detail the local scene.Clinical quality requires a minimum workload. In the acute hospital setting, without a minimum workload doctors cannot be properly trained; senior doctors cannot maintain expertise; and clinical teams will not be large enough to allow doctors to sub-specialise to provide 24-hour specialist cover, or to allow sensible working hours for junior staff. That has been the problem afflicting south-west London—too many hospitals are trying to provide too many services for the size of the population that they serve.

Sadly, the problem is by no means unique in the NHS. As the hon. Members for Richmond Park and for Kingston and Surbiton said, the fault lies entirely at the door of the iniquitous internal market. We have to cope with hospital being set against hospital. We have a job to do and are in the process of doing it across the party political divide to rehabilitate the concept of co-operation in contrast to the policies of confrontation and competition which characterised the previous regime.

We understand and appreciate the royal colleges' concern about the viability of some services at Queen Mary's hospital and Kingston hospital. That led to a local short-term clinical review and the reorganisation of services at Queen Mary's, Kingston and St. George's hospitals. That was necessary and it was done. In this context, it is important to appreciate the role of the royal colleges. It is not about them deciding the future of the hospital but about recognising their role and responsibility.

The Specialist Training Authority is legally responsible for approving hospital posts for training purposes and for safeguarding the standards of postgraduate medical training in the UK. The royal colleges advise the STA and do work on its behalf, but decisions rest with the STA which includes NHS and patient representatives. That provides an important degree of consistency and excellence across a large number of medical specialties. It is right for that to be so. We do not wish to see doctors trained in less than satisfactory environments. It is right for the STA to insist that hospital posts meet certain safeguards if they are to be accredited for training junior doctors. That is the background against which decisions have to be taken and the issue has to be addressed.

Clearly, the south-west London review is vital. It reflects concerns that the reorganisation of hospital services should always promote patient safety. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton expresses concerns—understandably, this is at the forefront of his mind and it should be at the forefront of all our minds—that we should do all we can to safeguard patient safety. That is what it is all about—putting patients first.

A reorganisation of hospital services has taken place. Clearly, the arrangements are not ideal, but they provide some time for more robust and satisfactory arrangements to be worked out. We have set up the review group to take that forward. It is representative of the local health community because we want to ensure that the serious attention to the problems in south-west London, which have proved so intractable, is informed by local concerns.

It is important also that the approach is consistent with what is happening elsewhere in London. That is why Sir Leslie Turnberg is overseeing the situation in south-west London and we have been keeping a close eye on progress.

The hon. Gentleman asks for specific reassurances. Consultation on the proposed service changes in south-west London commenced on 3 November and will close on 26 January. I expect the health authority to reach a formal decision on consultation in mid-February. We expect to receive Sir Leslie Turnberg's review shortly. The review and the Government's response to it will be published in due course.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Ministers' availability and the attention that they will pay to these issues. He requested that we keep diaries free immediately after the consultation. I understand that concern. He should know that we are concerned that all interested parties should make their views known during the consultation, so that they can be taken properly into account and given the serious attention that they warrant. He and all hon. Members should know that, by tradition in the House, the Minister's door is open to them. He and his colleagues are welcome to make their views known. The ministerial team is available to hon. Members and I have no doubt that he will use that access.

It is important that, in taking this process forward, we preserve the integrity of the consultation. We need to hear, and we do take into account, local people's deep concern after many years of uncertainty and diligent campaigning on their part to secure what they perceive as necessary services. I cannot comment in any detail on the subject matter of the consultation. I must not prejudge its outcome, but the hon. Gentleman can be assured there will be no asset stripping.

We will ensure that local services deliver the goods and we have made available the resources to ensure that, in coming months, winter pressures are coped with. Robust contingency plans have been drawn up to sustain services at Queen Mary's. They are aimed at ensuring the continuing confidence of general practitioners and of the public, and to prevent additional emergency admissions being diverted to Kingston during this period. We are determined to ensure that the pressures of the winter are met in a way that puts the patient first.

It would be wrong to speculate about the future, but let me assure the hon. Gentleman that, although it is important that we have a debate, and that there is a debate locally, about service configuration, we will ensure that

[Mr. Paul Boateng]

the NHS Executive works closely with the trust and with the local health service to protect the interests of patients, to put them first and to build together, based on consensus, openness and a true understanding of the challenges that face the health service, a health service of which we can all be justifiably proud. Of that, he need have no doubt.

I thank the hon. Gentleman and all hon. Members for their contribution to ensure that we achieve just that. It is a great challenge, but the interests of patients demand that we be up to it. I have no doubt that the Government will be up to it and will ensure that patient safety, welfare and interest always come first.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Three o'clock.

BEST C

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 3 November 1997

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

India (Defence Sales)

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what advice Ministers received on legal issues concerning the sale of Westland helicopters to the Indian Government within the terms of the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980; what advice Ministers received concerning value for money likely to be achieved by the project; what representations were received from (i) the Government of India and (ii) non-governmental organisations about the project; when was Parliament informed of the decision to sell the helicopters; when concerns about the value of the helicopters to the Indian Government were first raised with *(a)* officials and *(b)* Ministers and by whom; and when concerns about the developmental value of the helicopters were first raised with (1) officials and (2) Ministers and by whom. [14044]

Clare Short: I am placing in the Library of the House a copy of a report I commissioned which sets out the background to this project. The report does not include information about advice given to previous Ministers on the matter. The Government does not have access to such information concerning a previous Administration.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Archway Tower

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will ask the Property Services Agency for a report on the expenditure on Archway Tower, Junction Road, London N19; and what plans they have for its future use or demolition. [13500]

Dr. David Clark: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Locke to Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, dated 31 October 1997:

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has asked me to reply to your question about Archway Tower. You will be aware from previous letters from Mr Borrett of the level of rental and security costs. Since your last question it has become apparent that remedial works to the cladding are required and our agents estimate that this could cost up to £0.5m.

Every effort has been made to surrender this property to the landlords for an economic cost however we have been unable to secure any agreement with them. The lease does not permit demolition.

The property continues to be marketed by our agents. We are receiving some interest now for office occupation and complete refurbishment proposals are being examined. I am afraid that this interest is still in the early stages and I am unable to predict whether it will lead to occupation.

Archway Tower has also been considered for temporary use by the homeless, but was thought to be in the wrong position and too costly to convert.

Unoccupied Government Properties

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster how many Government-owned properties are currently unoccupied in the Reading, East constituency. [13382]

Dr. David Clark: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Property Advisers to the Civil Estate. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. John Locke, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Locke to Jane Griffiths, dated 31 October 1997:

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has asked me to reply to your question about vacant Government owned properties.

There are 4 Government buildings which are currently unoccupied in the Reading East constituency:-

Abbey Hall, Kings Road

Atlas House, 1 Silver Street

Monarch House, 77–79 Caversham Road

47–57 Queens Road

The properties are held on lease from commercial landlords and have a total floor area of 8,145 square metres. PACE is responsible for the disposal of these surplus offices and is marketing them through commercial agents.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery Grants

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many state primary schools have received sports lottery funds; how much each received; and what percentage of the total sports lottery funding this represents. [13016]

Mr. Fisher: Details of awards made to primary schools by the English Sports Council are as follows:

		£
Woollescote Primary School	West Midlands	92,696
Godmanchester Primary School	Cambridgeshire	289,000
Meadgate School	Essex	16,497
Wootton Village School	Oxfordshire	51,260
Seamer and Irton Primary School	North Yorkshire	8,400
Haselor School	Warwickshire	10,000
Laughton Primary School	East Sussex	199,605
Lower Place Primary School	Lancashire	55,422
Youth Sport Trust[1]		7,755,000
Total		8,478,080

Percentage of Lottery Sports Fund awarded to Primary Schools 1.30 per cent.

[1] The award to the Youth Sport Trust will help with the costs for the provision of sports equipment to over 500 primary schools in England.

PY AVAILABLE

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to alter the Sports Council lottery regulations regarding grants to primary schools. [13015]

Mr. Fisher: There are no Lottery regulations that apply solely to primary schools. The English Sports Council (ESC), the distributing body for sport-related projects in England, makes awards to all schools and colleges through its "School Community Sports Initiative."

The ESC has developed two proposals as part of the process to help primary schools benefit further from Lottery funds. The first is through part of a new range of revenue programmes encompassing support to the development of talent identification and coaching and leadership for Young People through the World Class Start Programme. Secondly, it is anticipated that primary schools may be able to benefit more suitably through the development of the joint-distributor Community Projects programme currently under development.

In addition, the White Paper "The People's Lottery", published in July, details the Government's proposals to changes and further improve the way in which the lottery operates. One of the most important proposals is the introduction of a new cause—The New Opportunities Fund—which will provide Lottery support for initiatives in education, health and the environment. Primary schools will be eligible to apply for funding from the New Opportunities Fund for out of school hours projects. The target is for at least half of all secondary schools and a quarter of all primary schools to be undertaking such projects and activities by 2001.

PRIME MINISTER

Diana, Princess of Wales

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Prime Minister what advice he requested on his constitutional role in the events surrounding the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales; what precedents were taken into account; and if he will make a statement. [13899]

The Prime Minister: I took such advice as I considered necessary. There were no precise precedents.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral statement of 28 October, *Official Report*, columns 700-02, if he will place in the Library the terms of his letter to the Secretary General of the UN, the Arab League, and the Organisation of African Unity, requesting them to send a delegation to Scotland, to show them the Scottish judicial systems, and to discuss arrangements for a trial in Scotland with international observers. [13937]

The Prime Minister: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued the invitation on the 28 October. I have arranged for the text to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what recent representations he has received relating to difficulties in the disclosure of evidence held by the US authorities in the event of a trial of Libyan suspects for the Lockerbie bombing in a neutral country. [13726]

The Prime Minister: As far as I am aware, I have not received any such representation.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral statement of 28 October, *Official Report*, columns 700–02, if he will take steps to gauge public opinion in Scotland as to the desirability of trying the Libyan Lockerbie suspects in a neutral country under Scots law. [13933]

The Prime Minister: I have nothing further to add to the oral answer that I gave the honourable Member on 28 October, *Official Report*, column 713.

Security Services Tribunal

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister how many complaints to the Security Services Tribunal under section 5 of the Security Service Act 1989 have been upheld in each year since the inception of the Act. [13779]

The Prime Minister: The Security Service Tribunal has made no determination in favour of a complaint since its inception. The annual reports of the Security Service Commissioner which cover the work of the Tribunal are available in the Library.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will amend the terms of reference of the Security Services Tribunal *(a)* to give reasons for its failure to make a determination in favour of a particular applicant and *(b)* to allow an applicant the opportunity to verify and correct information under consideration. [13780]

The Prime Minister: The Security Service Act 1989 provides that, where the tribunal does not uphold a complaint, it shall give notice to the complainant that no determination has been made in his favour, but that it shall not give the complainant any reasons for its determination. To provide reasons would risk compromising the operational effectiveness of the Security Service, to the detriment of national security. For similar reasons, it is not possible to allow individuals to have access to information held by the Service.

Guyana Rainforest

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral statement of 28 October, *Official Report*, columns 700–02, what reports he has received relating to the activities of Asian-owned logging companies in the Guyana Atlantic rainforest; and what conditions have been set for the granting of United Kingdom aid. [13888]

The Prime Minister: In 1995, the Government of Guyana, in consultation with Britain and other donors, imposed a moratorium on logging concessions in order to allow time to improve its ability to manage its forests sustainability. We understand that some logging companies, including Asian-owned ones, have expressed interest in operating in Guyana but no logging concessions or exploratory permits have been awarded since then to any companies.

As a result of this, the UK has been working with the Government of Guyana to strengthen the Guyanese Forestry Commission. The £3 million contribution to the Commonwealth's Iwokrama Rainforest Programme in Guyana, announced at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, will help conserve and sustainably manage 360,000 hectares of forest in Guyana and support

the efforts of the Guyanese Government to improve its forest management throughout the country. The specific conditions related to this grant are still under discussion.

BSE (Judicial Inquiry)

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Prime Minister when he expects to be able to announce his decision on a judicial inquiry into the BSE crisis. [13227]

The Prime Minister: The Government is considering the Question of a public inquiry into BSE very carefully. We shall make an announcement when we have reached a conclusion.

Security Services

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister what representations have been made to him proposing a different form of parliamentary Committee to monitor the security services instead of the present arrangements; and if he will make a statement. [13357]

The Prime Minster *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* From time to time, there have been suggestions that the Intelligence and Security Committee should be replaced by a Select Committee of Parliament.

The current oversight arrangements were introduced in the Intelligence Services Act in 1994, as a means of achieving the necessary balance between openness and accountability and the need to maintain the secrecy necessary for the efficient operation of the intelligence and security services.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Prime Minister what guidance is given to Ministers regarding the time involved in reply to letters from hon. Members; what is the average time currently taken; and what is the policy regarding such replies being signed by a Minister. [13201]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Individual Ministers are responsible for determining how their departments' correspondence is handled, and for setting departmental targets in reply to letters from hon. Members. It has been customary for the Government to publish annual statistics showing departments' and agencies' performance against their targets for reply to ministerial correspondence. The 1996 figures were published on 17 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *107–112*.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

National Audit Office

41. **Mr. Bayley:** What additional resources the Comptroller and Auditor General would require to enable the National Audit Office to respond to requests for studies from departmental Select Committees. [11776]

Mr. Sheldon: In the event of departmental select committees requesting studies from the Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office, the matter would need to be discussed with the Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts. The Comptroller and Auditor General and the National Audit Office wish to assist Parliament in any way possible, but it is important that any change should be consistent with the Comptroller and Auditor General statutory role.

The resource implications of any such arrangements would depend entirely on the scope of the work proposed. It would be for Parliament to decide what additional resources to provide to enable the Comptroller and Auditor General to support departmental select committeesinthisway.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations she has received concerning problems experienced by the Ulster folk and transport museum; and if she will make a statement on the steps her Department proposes to take. [12948]

Mr. Worthington: I have received representations from two Trustees of the Board of the Ulster Folk and Transport museum, who resigned in August, and from other Trustees. I am undertaking a series of meetings with these Trustees, including the Chairman and Vice-Chairman, to clarify the position and to determine what action, if any, is appropriate. In the meantime, I have appointed three new Trustees to fill vacancies which have arisen on the Board.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is she will review the composition of the board of trustees of the Ulster Folk and Transport museum; and if she will make a statement. [12947]

Mr. Worthington: No. The composition of the Boards of Trustees of both the Ulster Folk and Transport museum and the Ulster Museum is laid down in the museum (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. Legislation, which is currently being prepared to merge these two institutions, will abolish the existing Boards of Trustees and create a single Boards of Trustees of the new merged institution.

Southern Health and Social Services Board

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date was the most recent meeting of the Southern area health and social services board at which a decision was made on the flying of the Union flag at the Board headquarters in Armagh city. [12871]

Mr. Worthington: A letter was sent to all Health and Social Services Boards on 1 May 1997 advising them of the days in 1997 on which the Union Flag should be flown on Central Government Buildings. There is, however no requirement for the Boards to fly the Union flag on these dates. It is at the discretion of each organisation whether the flag should be flown on those buildings occupied by their staff.

The issue of whether the Southern Health and Social Services Board should or should not fly the Union Flag has never been discussed at a meeting of the Board.

Telecommunication Masts

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what research her Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the health effects of microwave radiation emitted from telecommunication masts. [12946]

Mr. Worthington: No specific research has been commissioned in relation to Northern Ireland. However, the Department of Health is currently supporting the following initiatives:

1. the review of possible health effects of electromagnetic fields, including mobile phone (microwave) frequencies, being undertaken by the Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation to the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB);
2. the World Health Organisation's study of electromagnetic fields; and
3. the Department's own radiation protection research programme.

In addition, a European Commission Expert Group has recommended a programme of scientific research to address the subject of mobile telephony and human health.

The Government obtains advice from NRPB on the risks to health of exposure to electromagnetic fields. Field strengths of electromagnetic radiation emitted by mobile phone transmitters, at locations to which the public would normally have access, are below the limits of exposure recommended by the NRPB published in *"Documents of the NRPB, Vol. 4, No. 5, 1993"*, a copy of which is in the library.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations she has received concerning the health effects of telecommunication masts. [12945]

Mr. Worthington: I have received representations from six MPs passing on concerns from 10 members of the public and two representations from local councillors.

Local Manufacturers and Producers

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how often *(a)* she has and *(b)* other Ministers at the Northern Ireland Office have had meetings during the past three months with representatives of (i) Safeways, (ii) Marks and Spencer, (iii) Sainsburys and (iv) Tesco in order to encourage purchases from local Northern Ireland manufacturers and producers. [12873]

Mr. Ingram: During the past three months, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has not met representatives of Safeway, Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury or Tesco to discuss local sourcing. I have held one such meeting with Tesco's Chief Executive and Lord Dubs has also highlighted the importance of local sourcing of foodstuffs during a meeting with Tesco on planning issues.

Meetings with Tesco and Sainsbury have been held at official level, a first meeting with Safeway is scheduled for early November and I am being kept informed of significant developments.

In addition, there is ongoing contact at official level with Marks and Spencer on matters of mutual interest, including local sourcing.

School Enrolments

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applicants were refused enrolment for the academic year beginning September 1997 at (i) Movilla high school, (ii) Region House grammar school, (iii) Dundonald primary school and (iv) Brooklands primary school. [12870]

Mr. Worthington: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers given to him on 28 October, *Official Report*, column 799.

War Pensions

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what factors led to her Department deciding to disregard war widows' pensions and war pensions in their entirety when assessing entitlement to housing benefit and rent rebates in Northern Ireland. [13940]

Mr. Worthington: The decision to disregard war widows and war pensions fully was carried forward into the Housing benefit legislation from the previous rent rebate and allowances scheme. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Rate Collection Agency administer Housing Benefit for the whole of Northern Ireland. As neither has access to other resources to subsidise Housing Benefit expenditure it was decided that the policy and legislation in Northern Ireland should follow the practice in Great Britain where the substantial majority of local authorities exercised their discretionary power to allow a full disregard.

Police Station, Coleraine

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she now expects work to begin on the new police station in Coleraine; and if she will make a statement. [14056]

Mr. Ingram: Future requirements for police buildings are currently being assessed against policing needs and availability of funding. No decision has yet been taken on the Coleraine project.

Audit Review Group

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will place in the Library copies of the follow-up report of the Audit Review Group. [14301]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have arranged for copies of the report to be placed in the Library.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Church Investments

37. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, as representing the Church Commissioners, what new proposals he has to increase the returns from Church investments. [11772]

Mr. Bell: In terms of new proposals, the short answer to my hon. Friend is for the Church Commissioners to hold their nerve during recent stock market corrections

and to have sufficient cash in hand to take advantage of any bargains that have been presented as a consequence of good stocks falling lower than their true market value.

40. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, as representing the Church Commissioners, what are the investment priorities of the Commissioners for the coming year. [11775]

Mr. Bell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave a moment ago to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn). The Commissioners' priorities are measured over the long term but we actively manage our asset portfolio to ensure that we hold the most appropriate investments to enable us to optimise our return on both capital and income.

Advance Corporation Tax

38. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, as representing the Church Commissioners, what steps the Commissioners are taking to reorganise their investment portfolio as a result of the withdrawal of ACT credit. [11773]

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his assistance in Committee in moving the amendment on Clause 35 of the Finance Bill which dealt with the abolition of the tax credit for charities and which would, had the amendment been carried, have been of assistance to the Commissioners.

The Commissioners welcome the time allowed by the Government for them to plan for the removal of ACT relief and the phasing of its impact between 1999 and 2004. We put our case to the Government after the changes announced in the Budget. As to investment policy in the light of the withdrawal of ACT credit, the Commissioners have decided that at least half of our portfolio should comprise investments in a wide range of United Kingdom commercial and industrial shares. We continue to think that these are appropriate assets to meet the needs of our beneficiaries within the Church of England and we are playing an active part in putting the case for full exemption from taxation to be restored to charities.

Mr. Flight: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in respect of compensation to the Church of England for the impact of the abolition of advance corporation tax credits on dividend income managed by the Commissioners. [11850]

Mr. Bell: The Commissioners put their case to the Government after the changes announced in the Budget and were active in briefing honourable Members in preparation for the debate on Clause 35 of the Finance Bill, which introduced the abolition of the tax credit for charities. They are contributing to the Government review of the taxation of charities. Submissions are being made by the Church Commissioners, the Churches Main Committee and other church organisations.

Redundant Churches

42. **Mr. Viggers:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, as representing the Church Commissioners, what support the Church Commissioners receive from Her Majesty's Government to enable them to maintain redundant and under-utilised churches.[11777]

Mr. Bell: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport provides 70 per cent. of the cost of the Churches Conservation Trust, which preserves redundant Church of England parish churches of particular historic and architectural quality. Churches which are open for public worship are the responsibility of their respective parochial Church Councils who have access through English Heritage to the Government's State Aid scheme. The Commissioners themselves receive no direct financial support from the Government for these purposes.

Church Pensions

43. **Mr. Kirkwood:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, as representing the Church Commissioners, what steps have been taken to implement the recommendations of the Social Security Committee, fifth report (HC 340 Session 1995–96) relating to pension provision in the Church. [11778]

Mr. Bell: The Social Security Committee recommended that the Commissioners' power to spend capital in discharging their past service pension liability should initially be for a limited period and that the Pensions Measure should provide for the full application of the legislation passed by Parliament to regulate and control pension schemes. These recommendations were reflected in the Pensions Measure which received Royal Assent earlier this year.

Monsanto

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment he has carried out of the investment in Monsanto. [11774]

Mr. Bell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this at our last question time and for subsequently writing to me. The Commissioners have taken up his points with the Monsanto Chemical Company and I have written to him on the subject.

Monsanto have assured the Commissioners that they are a life science company playing a pivotal role in improving the health and nutritional needs of future generations whilst being strongly committed to complying with various laws and Government regulations concerning environmental matters and employee safety and health.

From an investment standpoint, Monsanto have showed excellent returns over recent years for their shareholders.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Kazakhstan

Mr. Wallace: To aks the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken

during the last three months to monitor allegations of human rights violations in Kazakhstan; and if he will make a statement. [12862]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Our Embassy in Almaty constantly monitors the human rights situation in Kazakhstan. We take up specific cases with the Kazakh authorities when necessary.

Our main concerns revolve around prison conditions and the high rate of capital punishment. In an effort to improve this situation, the UK has offered to support a proposal put forward by the United Nations Development Programme to help reform the penal system in Kazakhstan. We will continue to keep this under close review.

Migration and Visa Unit

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many staff vacancies there are in the migration and visa unit of his Department; and for each how long the post has been vacant. [13884]

Mr. Fatchett: There are no vacancies. Additional staff have been deployed in order to meet agreed targets for response to Members' correspondence.

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the current backlog of work in the migration and visa unit of his Department. [13883]

Mr. Fatchett: Between 1 May and 30 September, the MVCU received 4,801 letters from MPs, of which 307 had not been answered on 1 October.

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the migration and visa unit of his Department last met the 15 days quality standard for replies to letters from hon. Members. [13885]

Mr. Fatchett: In May 1997, the quality standard was met in over 90 per cent. of cases. Following a substantial increase in correspondence after the election this percentage fell to 41.95 per cent. in September. Extra staff have been deployed to reestablish an acceptable standard as soon as possible.

Visas

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many requests he and his Ministers have received from hon. Members since 1 May 1997 to discuss general issues of entry clearance and visas; and how many of these were responded to within *(a)* one week, *(b)* two weeks, *(c)* one month, *(d)* three months and *(e)* over three months. [13882]

Mr. Fatchett: To provide the information requested would involve disproportionate cost.

European Union

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the forthcoming business in the Council of the European Union for November; and list major European Union events for the next six months. [14287]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This is the monthly forecast of business for November 1997. The following Councils are scheduled:

	Venue	*Event*
3 November	Brussels	Consumer Council
5 November	Brussels	Ecofin Council
10 November	Brussels	Research Council
10 November	Brussels	General Affairs Council
13 November	Brussels	Industry Council
17–18 November	Brussels	Agriculture Council
19 November	Brussels	Fisheries Council (tbc)
20 November	Brussels	Education Council
24 November	Brussels	Culture Council
24–25 November	Brussels	General Affairs Council
27 November	Brussels	Budget Council
27 November	Brussels	Internal Market Council
28 November	Brussels	Development Council

The following subjects are likely to be discussed:

3 November: Consumer Council

Adoption of the Agenda.

Approval of the list of A items.

Consumer Guarantees.

General debate on Article 1–4, and possible political agreement.

Green paper on Food Safety: open debate.

European Home and Leisure Accident Surveillance System (EHLASS): possible debate.

Consumer confidence in Financial Services: Commission presentation.

Proposed Directive and amend Product Liability Directive: Commission presentation.

Other Business.

5 November: ECOFIN Council

Approval of the Agenda.

Approval of the list of A items.

Employment guidelines.

Other elements relevant for the extraordinary European council meeting on employment (possible item).

Other business.

6 November: Social Affairs Council

Preparation for the European Council on Employment: 21 November

10 November: Research Council

Adoption of the agenda.

Approval of the list of A Items (possible item).

Fifth Research Technology Development (RTD) Framework Programme: Discussion to identify Policy guidelines: Criteria.

Scientific and Technological objectives and content.

General objectives and Thematic Programmes.

Horizontal theme: International cooperation.

Horizontal theme: Innovation and Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs).

Horizontal theme: Improving human research potential and the Knowledge Base.

Structure.

Arrangements for financial participation.

Fifth Framework Programme of the European Atomic Energy Committee (EAEC) for research and training activities:

Policy debate.

Nuclear Fusion.

Controlled Thermo-nuclear Fusion.

Implementation and Management of Research Programmes.

Proposal for a Council decision concerning the rules for participation and governing the dissemination of research results (possible item):

presentation by the Commission.

Working document on the specific programmes in the Fifth Framework Programme (possible item):

Presentation by the Commission.

Signature of the Scientific and Technological cooperation agreement with the United States (possible item).

Other business:

Eureka: Communication by the Portuguese delegation.

10 November: General Affairs Council

A Points.

EP Resolutions.

EU/ACP Relations: Orientation Debate.

Agenda 2000.

Post Amsterdam: Reports of Secretary General on: Planning Cell.

Integration of Schengen Secretariat.

Preparation of Special European Council on Employment.

OCT Mid-term Review.

Albania.

Turkey.

Middle East Peace Process.

Former Yugoslavia.

Any Other Business.

13 November: Industry Council

Approval of agenda.

Approval of the list of A Points.

The Steel Industry:

8th Monitoring Report on aid to the Steel Industry: presentation by the Commission.

Commission Communication on Financial Activities and the

Expiry of the European Coal Steel Community (ECSC) Treaty: presentation by the Commission.

Ship Building:

Commission Communication towards a new ship building policy.

Proposal for a Council Regulation establishing new rules to ship building:

presentation by the Commission.

State Aid:

Proposal for a Council Regulation concerning the application articles 92 and 93 of the EC Treaty to certain categories horizontal state aid (the "block exemption" regulation):

orientation debate.

Competitiveness:

Presidency Note on the Future Competitiveness Work Program "Research and Development" as a factor of competitiveness employment:

to be taken over lunch with discussion based on a list of questions to be presented to Coreper on 5 November. The focus of the debate will be competitiveness not the Fifth Framework Programme.

Communication by the Commission: The European aerospace industry meeting the global challenge:

Presentation by the Commission.

The Information Society:

Action Plan for the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Industries:

Presentation by the Commission.

Communication by the Commission: A European Initiative in Electronic Commerce:

Draft Council Conclusions.

SMEs:

Commission Recommendation of 22 April 1997 on improving and simplifying the environment for business start-ups. Communication by the Commission: European Capital Markets SMEs: prospects and potential obstacles to progress: Presentation by the Commission

17–18 November: Agriculture Council

—Agenda not yet available

19 November: Fisheries Council (TBC)

—Agenda not yet available

20 November: Education Council

—Agenda not yet available

24 November: Culture Council

—Agenda not yet available

24–25 November: General Affairs Council

—Agenda not yet available

27 November: Budget Council

—Agenda not yet available

27 November: Internal Market Council

—Agenda not yet available

28 November: Development Council

—Agenda not yet available

Iran

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on current UK-Iran diplomatic relations. [13727]

Mr. Fatchett: Britain and Iran usually have fifteen full-time diplomatic staff in each other's capitals. Both Embassies are normally headed by a Chargé d'Affaires. However, after the Mykonos verdict in April, both the British and Iranian Chargés were temporarily withdrawn. Both Embassies are currently headed by acting Chargé d'Affaires.

European Movement

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what public funding has been made available to the European Movement in the current financial year. [14089]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No Government funding has been made available to the European Movement in the current financial year.

Correspondence

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department will reply to the hon. Member's letters of 22 September relating to Nasreen Akhtar (ref. GV100/35962), Mohammed Arif (ref. IMM/D6517) and Gurmail Kaur (ref. GV100/39454) and of 23 September relating to Sikander Mahmood (ref. GV100/39978). [13886]

Mr. Fatchett: Replies were sent to the hon. Member's letters of 22 September on 26 October with reference to cases GV100/41057 and GV100/39454 and on 29 October with reference to case GV100 39454. Further information

is awaited from Islamabad on case GV100/35962 and the hon. Member will be sent a reply as soon as that information is received.

Burma

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports the Government have received relating to the treatment of the Karen people by the Burma military Government; and what is Her Majesty's Government's policy on this issue. [13887]

Mr. Fatchett: We are deeply concerned by human rights abuses against Karen and other ethnic minorities in Burma. We have received reports of torture, rapes, killings, forced conscription and relocations of villagers. We have strongly protested to the Burmese authorities in Rangoon and London. We continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Burmese refugees in Thailand.

TREASURY

National Savings

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which companies bidding to take over control of the administration of National Savings have indicated that they would be able to offer new work opportunities in the Blackpool area to any National Savings employees who might be deemed surplus to requirements at the time of their acquiring responsibility for National Savings administration. [13384]

Mrs. Liddell: Details of the information provided to National Savings by the four candidates for a private sector partnership are commercially sensitive at this stage and must remain confidential.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his Department's long-term policy in respect of National Savings. [13162]

Mrs. Liddell: Our policy is to find the Government's borrowing requirements as efficiently as possible. National Savings makes a valuable contribution to our funding strategy, and I expect it to continue to do so. I welcome the work which the Agency is doing to study the potential for greater efficiencies through improved marketing and the examination and possible involvement of a private sector partner in its operations.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what account he will take of local job-creation possibilities in deciding which company will take over the running of National Savings local administration in the Blackpool area. [13385]

Mrs. Liddell: The potential for creating new jobs to offset the anticipated continuing reduction in the Agency's manpower will be a key consideration as proposals for private sector involvement in the operations of National Savings are evaluated.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to receive the conclusions of the study into the future accommodation requirements of National Savings. [13161]

Mrs. Liddell: A study of the potential for private provision of National Savings accommodation is being conducted in parallel with work to explore the scope for private sector involvement in National Savings operations. I would not expect final conclusions before the Spring of 1998.

Exchange Rate

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what changes took place in the Sterling/Deutschmark exchange rate between the opening and closing of the financial markets on Thursday 25 September; [13405]

(2) what changes took place in the Sterling/Deutschmark exchange rate between noon and the closing of the financial markets on Thursday 25 September. [13401]

Mrs. Liddell: Sterling rose by 1.76 pfennigs to DM 2.8769 between the opening and closing of the financial markets on Thursday 25 September. Between noon and the close, it was virtually unchanged.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes took place in the Sterling/Deutschmark exchange rate between the opening and closing of the financial markets on Friday 17 October. [13381]

Mrs. Liddell: Sterling rose by 3 pfennigs to close at DM 2.8569.

European Council

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Council meeting of the Economic and Finance Ministers of the European Union held on 13 October. [13739]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I represented the UK at the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Brussels on 13 October, and at a formal dinner with Finance Ministers from the EFTA countries the previous evening.

The Council welcomed the UK's Convergence Programme—in particular the Government's commitment to sound finances and stability-oriented monetary policy as a basis for economic growth and investment. The Council also noted with satisfaction the changed arrangements for the implementation of monetary policy, which have helped to lower inflation expectations in the UK. The Council also noted with approval the Welfare to Work initiative and the Employment Action Plan. The Council agreed Conclusions on the Programme and adopting a text for an Excessive Deficits Recommendation. The text of the Conclusions follows this answer.

The dinner, on 12 October, was a useful opportunity to exchange views with the Finance Ministers of Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, particularly on employment. I was pleased to see the support that my own approach to employment and employability enjoys both within the EU and EFTA.

The Council discussed the Commission's Communication on Harmful Tax Competition in the EU, focusing on the Code of Conduct. The UK recognised that a voluntary Code might play a helpful role in tackling harmful tax competition, but would only agree to a Code

that respected Member States' continues competence in the field of tax. The UK, and other Member States, called for several changes to be made to the draft Code. Discussion on the Code will continue in the Taxation Policy Group.

The Commission introduced its Communication on the Practical Aspects of the Euro. This was another useful exchange of views, with Ministers contributing their ideas on how to ensure the smoothest possible transition both for businesses and for public authorities in those countries joining the single currency in January 1999.

The Council considered the liberalisation of capital movements in the context of the IMF. Discussion centred around the compatibility of possible new IMF articles with the Treaty. Council agreed that Monetary Committee should refine EU policy on IMF proposals but that Member States should continue to represent themselves in negotiating the new articles.

The Council discussed a Commission Communication on Public-Private Partnerships in the sphere of Trans-European Networks. The Communication was the result of work by Commissioner Kinnock's High Level Group on the same subject and was welcomed.

The Council took some agenda items over lunch. We discussed the Commission's proposals on enlargement as set out in their July proposals on Agenda 2000. For the UK, the key issues were that the 1999 Own Resources Ceiling of 1.27 per cent. of Community GNP is not raised for the period 2000–06, and that spending is set at levels much lower than this. Substantial policy reform is also necessary to make enlargement affordable and successful. The Council agreed to consider at the next ECOFIN the work to be carried forward on the development of economic coordination in Stage 3 of EMU. The Presidency described its preparations for the Jobs Summit on 20–21 November, and an extraordinary meeting of the ECOFIN Council was agreed for 5 November to do further work on this.

Text of Council conclusions on UK convergence programme

On 13 October 1997 the Council welcomed the new United Kingdom Convergence Programme. It noted the progress that had been made in reducing the government deficit and inflation under the previous programme and it welcomed the new government's ambitious but realistic programme to enhance the pace of adjustment.

The Council welcomed, in particular, the government's commitment to sound finances and stability oriented monetary policy as a basis for economic growth and investment. Action has been taken to increase the pace of deficit reduction: the Council noted with satisfaction that the government deficit will be well below 3 per cent. of GDP in the calendar year 1997 while the debt ratio will remain below 60 per cent. of GDP. It noted that the continued commitment to tight expenditure control represented a sound basis for long term budgetary consolidation. The Council urged the UK authorities to make sure that continued borrowing over the economic cycle to finance investment represents an adequate medium term fiscal rule consistent with the objectives of the stability and growth pact.

The Council noted with satisfaction the changed arrangements for the implementation of monetary policy, which have helped to lower inflation expectation in the UK. The Council also encouraged the UK Government to recognise the role of the exchange rate in maintaining stability. The Council noted the UK inflation target of 2.5 per cent. and urged the UK Government to keep this under review in order to ensure that UK inflation remains low and compatible with inflation rates in other Member States.

The Council noted with approval the broader social and economic objectives outlined in the programme and in particular, the concern to improve the opportunities for employment for the young and long-term unemployed. The Council noted that these issues are also dealt with the UK Employment Action Plan. The Council invited the Commission, in close cooperation with the Monetary Committee, to monitor the implementation of the Convergence Programme.

Dorneywood

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the *(a)* official entertainment functions and *(b)* conferences which have been held at Dorneywood since May 1997. [12920]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* Since the beginning of May 1997, Dorneywood has been used for two sets of Ministerial conferences.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers, who have been admitted and not held since 1994, officials have subsequently been unable to trace. [13392]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that the information requested is not available.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the options he is considering to stem the flow of Czech and Slovak asylum seekers into the United Kingdom. [13400]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The firm line we have taken with abusive asylum seekers from these countries has already led to a substantial decrease in the numbers of new arrivals. Many recent arrivals have already been removed to France. Where appropriate, we have detained applicants. My right hon. Friend announced on 27 October a reduction from 28 to five days in the period allowed for post-interview representations in certain cases where claims are judged likely to be abusive. All applications continue to be considered individually, on their merits, in accordance with our obligations under the 1951 United Nations Convention. Policy options are constantly reviewed to ensure we maintain our firm line.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each establishment used by his Department to hold in custody asylum seekers under immigration laws the numbers currently held. [13502]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As at 30 September 1997, the most recent date for which information is available, a total of 772 persons who had sought asylum at some stage, were recorded as being detained solely under Immigration Act powers. I regret, however, that a reliable breakdown of these detainees, by location of detention, is not currently available.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum have been received from Algerian nationals for each month since January 1996; and of these how many have had their application *(a)* granted, *(b)* refused but been allowed to remain and *(c)* refused and been removed from Britain. [13494]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Decisions[1] on applications[2] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, and the removal or voluntary departure of asylum applicants, excluding dependants, for nationals of Algeria, January 1996 to September 1997[3,4]

Number of principal applicants

	Applications for asylum	*Grants of asylum*	*Grants of exceptional leave to remain*	*Refused asylum and exceptional leave to remain*	*Removals and voluntary departures*
January 1996	100	*	—	195	15
February 1996	75	*	—	160	15
March 1996	100	*	*	155	15
April 1996	50	*	—	160	20
May 1996	40	5	*	165	25
June 1996	30	*	*	145	15
July 1996	85	*	—	190	15
August 1996	65	*	—	125	20
September 1996	35	5	*	135	20
October 1996	55	*	*	170	10
November 1996	40	5	5	130	10
December 1996	35	5	5	100	15
January 1997	55	5	—	100	15
February 1997	35	5	—	75	10
March 1997	45	*	—	95	20
April 1997	35	5	—	65	15
May 1997	55	5	—	60	25
June 1997	50	5	*	85	15
July 1997	60	5	—	70	20
August 1997	60	5	—	60	25
September 1997	60	15	—	15	5
Total	1,175	80	15	2,455	340

[1] Information is of initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.

[2] Applications and decisions on asylum applications may not relate to the same cases within each period.

[3] Figures rounded to the nearest 5 with * = 1 or 2.

[4] Application and decision figures for 1997 and removals for 1996 and 1997 are provisional.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum have been received in each of the last 12 months from *(a)* the Czech Republic and *(b)* the Slovak Republic; and how many people have been (i) granted asylum, (ii) refused but given leave to remain and (iii) removed from Britain. [13489]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table:

Table 1: Decisions[1] on applications[2] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, for nationals of the Czech Republic and Slovakia October 1996 to September 1997[3]

Number of principal applicants

	Applications for asylum	*Grants of asylum*	*Grants of exceptional leave to remain*	*Refused asylum and exceptional leave to remain*
Czech Republic				
October 1996	5	—	—	5
November 1996	5	—	—	5
December 1996	5	—	—	5
January 1997	5	—	—	5
February 1997	10	—	—	10
March 1997	5	—	—	10
April 1997	*	—	—	*
May 1997	5	—	—	5
June 1997	15	—	—	15
July 1997	30	—	—	20
August 1997	30	—	—	35
September 1997	15	—	—	5
Total	135	—	—	115
Slovakia				
October 1996	5	—	—	20
November 1996	10	—	—	15
December 1996	10	—	—	10
January 1997	*	—	—	*
February 1997	*	—	—	5
March 1997	5	—	—	15
April 1997	5	—	—	10
May 1997	*	—	—	15
June 1997	25	—	—	25
July 1997	20	—	—	25
August 1997	50	—	—	45
September 1997	55	—	—	10
Total	190	—	—	195

Notes:

[1] Information is of initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.

[2] Applications and decisions on asylum applications may not relate to the same cases within each period.

[3] Figures rounded to the nearest 5 with * = 1 or 2.

Figures for October 1997 are not yet available.

Source:

Immigration and General Unit, RSD.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were held in custody under immigration laws in month since Janaury 1996; and what was the average length of time of such detentions. [13493]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker) on 11 June, *Official Report* column *441*, which gives the available information on detained asylum seekers for selected dates in 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997. Information on the number held at the end of each month between May and September 1997 is given in the table.

I regret that reliable information on the average length of detention could only be obtained by examination of individual case records and is, therefore, only available at disproportionate cost.

North Wales Police

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make additional resources available to North Wales constabulary to provide for a significant increase in the number of police officers on the beat. [13326]

Mr. Michael: The North Wales Police Authority's spending capacity for 1997–98 was increased by 3.9 per cent. (£2.7 million) to £72 million, which was above the national average. No final decisions have been taken about the allocation of funding to police authorities for 1998–99. The Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 removed decisions about police numbers from the hands of the Home Secretary.

It is now for individual chief constables and police authorities to determine the number of police officers in each force, having regard to the resources available to them. At the end of March 1997, North Wales Police had 62.4 per cent. of strength deployed to patrol duties. This is significantly better than the average for England and Wales of 57.6 per cent. This Government will do all that it can to relieve the police of unnecessary bureaucratic burdens to allow chief constables to put more officers back on the beat.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the suppliers to his Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13548]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The Home Office and its agencies are required to pay all their bills within the agreed contract terms, or where no such terms exist, within 30 days from receipt of the goods or service or a valid invoice, whichever is later. Detailed information on payments to individual suppliers could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97.

Pakistan

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the inclusion of Pakistan in the white list of countries designated free of persecution under the terms of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1997; and if he will make a statement. [13150]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We are examining the general operation of the designated safe countries provision as part of our continuing review of asylum law and procedures.

Border and Passport Controls

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the terms of reference of the spending review dealing with issues relating to immigration and to border and passport controls. [13399]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The terms of reference of the study of immigration controls at ports which forms part of the Home Office comprehensive spending review are:

To review the cost effectiveness of United Kingdom immigration controls, with particular reference to the deployment of resources at ports of entry, taking into account:

- legal constraints following the Amsterdam summit;
- projected increases in the number of passengers arriving in the United Kingdom;
- projected changes in the numbers and nature of inadmissible and inadequately documented passengers arriving in the United Kingdom;
- new technology and consequent organisational changes in immigration clearance processes;
- the potential for close co-operation with other agencies, including carriers and port authorities;
- the scope and application of the Carriers' Liability Act;
- the scope for joint working with Customs and the police;
- the scope for charging for services and the attendant financial regime;
- the balance between pre, post and on-entry control, including the costs and benefits of more preventative activity.

The study will have regard to other work, including the foreign and commonwealth office review of entry clearance, the study of asylum process, the appeals review, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) reviews of detention and enforcement strategy and the implications for the IND Casework Programme.

Deportations

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many British citizens have in the past 12 months left the United Kingdom with their spouses as a result of a deportation order being served on the spouse; in how many cases the travel cost of the British citizen was paid out of public funds; and what was the total sum involved. [13305]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is our normal policy to offer a public expense departure to any dependants (spouse and minor children) who wish to accompany a deportee on removal from the United Kingdom.

Details about British citizens who elect to leave the United Kingdom in this way are not recorded centrally and the costs of their travel are not distinguishable.

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many deportation orders have been made in each of the last four years against persons aged over 60 years; and how many such persons have been deported. [13346]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The numbers of deportation orders made, and the numbers of removals effected, against persons aged over 60 years when the relevant action was taken, are given in the table. The numbers deported do not include persons removed as illegal entrants or under port refusal procedures.

Action taken against persons aged over 60 years[1] under the deportation process[2] 1994–1997[3]

	1994	1995	1996	1997[3]
Deportation orders made	32	65	65	17
Persons removed from the United Kingdom under the deportation process[2,4,5]	40	62	55	28

[1] Covers persons aged over 60 years when the relevant action took place.

[2] Excludes persons removed as illegal entrants.

[3] Provisional figures for January for September 1997.

[4] Includes voluntary departures after deportation action had been initiated.

[5] Some removals relate to deportation orders made in previous years.

Prison Boards of Visitors

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his policy on the requirement for all chairs of prison boards of visitors to be appointed directly by the Home Secretary. [13317]

Ms Quin: The procedure whereby the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of Boards of Visitors are appointed by the Secretary of State, after consultation with the Board, follows a recommendation to that effect made in the 1995 report of the Ministerial Review of the Role of Boards of Visitors. The change in procedure was made to acknowledge the importance of these roles.

Fire Safety

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action his Department is taking in respect of fire safety levels in hotels within the EU. [12982]

Mr. George Howarth: My officials have written to their counterparts in other interested Departments and will shortly meet representatives of the tourist industry to discuss further the concerns they and others have raised with us about fire safety in hotel accommodation in some member states. In the light of those and other ongoing discussions, I intend to consult Ministerial colleagues to determine whether there is a need for us to press for an improvement in compliance with European Community recommendation 86/666/EEC—on fire safety in existing hotels—by other member states.

Within the United Kingdom, we consider fire safety levels in hotels to be high, and our domestic legislation in this area already meets the principles of European Community recommendation 86/666/EEC on fire safety in existing hotels. We must therefore carefully weigh any perceived shortcomings in hotel fire safety in other member states against not only public safety but the possibility of unnecessarily imposing further legislation burdens on our own domestic tourist industry which would probably have no tangible safety benefit for hotel guests in the United Kingdom.

Daylight Saving

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce Central European Time. [13759]

Mr. George Howarth: None, but we shall continue to listen to all sides of the argument.

Mr. Shayler

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much expenditure has so far been incurred in making inquiries over Mr. Shayler leaving M15. [13354]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The information requested is not available.

Visitors' Visas

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to change the visitors' visa regime. [13930]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Our manifesto commits us to providing a streamlined right of appeal for visitors denied a visa. We are examining the options for doing this.

Chief Constable of Manchester

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief Constable of Manchester as to the cost of *(a)* damages and *(b)* legal fees paid in settlement of the case brought against him by Mr. Kevin Taylor; and if he will make a statement. [13966]

Mr. Michael: A settlement was concluded between the Greater Manchester Police and Mr. Kevin Taylor in June 1995. I understand that the terms of the settlement are a matter of confidentiality between the two parties involved.

Firearms

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he proposes to publish his consultative document on firearms legislation; and what will be the latest date for submissions. [13910]

Mr. Michael: The Government have made it clear that our first priority is to see the legislation to ban .22 handguns reach the statute book. Once the complete ban on handguns has been achieved, we will consider wether further steps are required to secure public safety. If we consider that further steps are necessary, we will consult widely with all interested parties, but no timescale has been set, either for our consideration or for consultation.

Immigration Detainees

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the policy of his Department in respect of hon. Members seeing their constituents who are in detention awaiting removal to another country. [13981]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Hon. Members will normally be given access to Immigration Service Detention Centres between the hours of 0800 and 2100, and outside these hours by prior arrangement. In Her Majesty's Prisons, hon. Members may visit detainees on production of a valid special visiting order issued by the governor, during the visiting hours specified. I understand that the hon. Member has also raised a question about his visit to Charles Street Police Station, Leicester, which is being replied to separately.

Intelligence Services Act (Warrants)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many warrants have been issued for each year under sections 5 and 6 of the Intelligence Services Act 1994 since its inception; and of those how many were authorised by the Secretary of State and how many by civil servants. [13782]

Mr. Straw: For reasons of national security, information on the number of warrants issued under sections 5 and 6 of the Intelligence Services Act 1994 is not published.

Civil Servants do not authorise the issue of warrants. However, under the emergency procedure provided at section 6(1)(b) of the Intelligence Services Act 1994, a warrant may be issued under the hand of an official of or above the rank of Assistant Under Secretary of State provided that the Secretary of State has expressly authorised its issue (typically by telephone), and a statement of that fact is endorsed on the warrant.

Any such emergency warrant must be renewed within 2 days under the hand of the Secretary of State.

Gaming Board

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the names, qualifications and experience of the members of the Gaming Board; and what plans he has to review the membership. [13117]

Mr. George Howarth: The members of the Gaming Board are Lady Shirley Littler (Chairman), Lady Carolyn Trethowan JP, Mr. William Kirkpatrick, Mr. Bryan Austin and Mr. Donald Elliott CBE QPM.

The members of the Board have diverse qualifications and experience. Lady Littler's background is in public administration and regulation, Lady Trethowan is a magistrate and a former member of a betting and gaming licensing bench. Mr. Kirkpatrick and Mr. Austin both have business backgrounds and Mr. Elliott is a former chief constable.

Lady Littler and Lady Trethowan are due to retire within the next year and competitions are currently being held to fill their posts. My right hon. Friend has no wider plans to review the membership of the Board.

Volatile Substances

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will assess the advantages of prohibiting the sale of the most dangerous and commonly abused volatile substances to those under 16 years of age. [13130]

Mr. George Howarth: The Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985 makes it an offence for retailers to sell substances to a person under the age of 18 if they have reason to believe that the young person intends to inhale them or their fumes for the purpose of intoxication. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs undertook a study into volatile substance abuse, the results of which were published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office in 1995. A copy of their report "Volatile Substance Abuse" is in the Library. They concluded that there were no acceptable legislative changes which would do more than the Act already does to protect young people.

Prisoner Repatriation

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will make decisions on outstanding applications from prisoners convicted of terrorist offences for repatriation to the Republic of Ireland. [14430]

Mr. Straw: I have recently approved three applications for repatriation to the Republic of Ireland submitted by prisoners convicted of terrorist offences. These were approved on the basis that the Republic will continue to enforce the sentences imposed by the courts here in accordance with the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons. Remaining repatriation applications are at various stages of consideration either here or in the Republic and will be determined as soon as possible.

Exceptional Leave to Remain

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been given exceptional leave to remain in the United Kingdom, broken down by category of original application for each quarter since 1 January 1994. [13880]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is for those persons initially granted exceptional leave to remain on refusal of asylum. Information for persons granted exceptional leave without originally having applied for asylum is not separately identifiable in the statistics.

In the second and third quarters of 1997 respectively, 540 and 950 grants of exceptional leave on refusal of asylum, excluding dependants, were made. Equivalent information for each quarter of 1995, 1996 and the first quarter of 1997 can be found in table 1.4 of the Home Office statistical bulletin "Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1996", issue 15/97. Issue 9/96 of the same publication provides the same information for each quarter of 1994. Copies of both publications are available in the Library.

Interception of Communications (Warrants)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many warrants have been issued for each year under section 2 of the Interception of Communications Act 1985 since its inception to *(a)* police and *(b)* the security services; and of those how many were authorised by the Secretary of State and how many by civil servants. [13783]

Mr. Straw: The following information is obtained from the Annual Reports of the Interception Commissioner. The Government support the policy, adopted by successive Commissioners, of not publishing a further breakdown of the figures, and of excluding numbers of warrants issued by the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, because it would be prejudicial to national security to do so.

It is only the Secretary of State who may authorise the issue of a warrant. Civil servants do not authorise the issue of interception warrants. However, under the emergency procedure provided at section 4(1)(b) of the Interception of Communications Act 1985, a warrant may be issued under the hand of an official of or above the rank of Assistant Under Secretary of State provided that the Secretary of

State has expressly authorised its issue and a statement of that fact is endorsed on the warrant. Any such emergency warrant must be renewed within 2 days under the hand of the Secretary of State.

Romany People

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the degree of violent hostility to Romany people in the Czech and Slovak Republics. [13490]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have access to a wide range of information about the situation of Roma in Eastern European countries, including information about instances of racially motivated violence and discrimination and about the response of the authorities in the countries concerned. This information is taken fully into account when applications for asylum are considered, and all such applications are determined in accordance with our obligations under the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the total number of *(a)* unconvicted prisoners on remand and *(b)* unsentenced prisoners on remand, by gender and in total, on the last day of each of the last 36 months for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [13722]

Ms Quin: The information requested is given in the table. Information on the male and female remand populations, by month, is published in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics, England and Wales" (table 1.2 of the 1996 edition, Cm 3732). Copies are in the library.

Population of remand prisoners in prisons in England and Wales on the last day of the month: October 1994 to September 1997

On last day of month	*Untried*		*Total*	*Convicted unsentenced*		*Total*
	Males	*Females*		*Males*	*Females*	
1994						
October	8,832	389	9,221	3,244	141	3,385
November	8,783	363	9,146	3,295	156	3,451
December	8,387	330	8,717	2,583	126	2,709
1995						
January	8,647	378	9,025	3,352	146	3,498
February	8,320	346	8,666	3,015	165	3,180
March	7,890	349	8,239	2,843	166	3,009
April	7,913	346	8,259	2,521	150	2,671
May	8,116	339	8,455	2,580	147	2,727
June	7,613	337	7,950	2,948	158	3,106
July	7,834	313	8,147	2,650	143	2,793
August	8,049	347	8,396	2,782	130	2,912
September	7,813	349	8,162	2,867	149	3,016
October	8,092	341	8,433	2,910	158	3,068
November	7,985	352	8,337	2,904	143	3,047
December	7,829	326	8,155	2,312	109	2,421
1996						
January	8,020	325	8,345	3,042	154	3,196
February	7,914	309	8,223	3,071	157	3,228
March	7,608	325	7,933	2,934	145	3,079
April	7,795	358	8,153	3,108	158	3,266
May	7,845	364	8,209	2,957	153	3,110
June	8,028	404	8,432	2,994	142	3,136
July	7,982	397	8,379	3,013	169	3,182
August	8,006	392	8,398	3,112	168	3,280
September	8,148	375	8,523	3,243	197	3,440
October	8,232	398	8,630	3,327	197	3,524
November	8,275	412	8,687	3,264	196	3,460
December	8,192	387	8,579	2,789	167	2,956
1997						
January	8,150	389	8,539	3,431	209	3,640
February	7,989	349	8,338	3,473	187	3,660
March	8,052	361	8,413	3,217	187	3,404
April	7,981	387	8,368	3,384	205	3,589
May	7,899	370	8,269	3,238	190	3,428
June	8,134	429	8,563	3,384	158	3,542
July	8,185	413	8,598	3,341	205	3,546
August	8,288	429	8,717	3,461	199	3,660
September	8,349	426	8,775	3,450	204	3,654

Immigration Rules

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the immigration rules in respect of spouses where the sponsor is disabled and unable to work. [13877]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: There are no such plans. The rules relating to maintenance and accommodation allow a person who is present and settled here to sponsor their spouse to come to the United Kingdom, providing there will be no additional recourse to public funds. This means that a sponsor may continue to receive benefits to which he is entitled in his own right.

Police Service Targets

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what will be the key objectives and key performance indicators for the police service in 1998–99. [14373]

Mr. Straw: I am arranging for copies of the Key Objectives and Key Performance Indicators for the police service in 1998–99 to be placed in the Library at 11.00 am tomorrow.

Individual Cases (Ministerial Meetings)

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many requests since 1 May he and his Ministers have received from hon. Members to discuss individual cases; and how many of these have been granted. [13879]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I could not say without consulting each individual file how many meeting requests I have received, but I will always be happy to meet hon. Members to discuss cases unless there are strong reasons for not doing so. Often a meeting proves to be unnecessary because the case is resolved to the Member's satisfaction, and if an individual is detained pending removal I will often prefer to handle representations in writing or by telephone in order to prevent delay.

I have already held 25 such meetings at the Home Office, and have another 10 scheduled for the next month. I aim to respond promptly to such requests.

Immigration Policy

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many requests he and his Ministers have received from hon. Members since 1 May 1997 to discuss general issues of immigration policy; and how many of these were responded to within *(a)* one week, *(b)* two weeks, *(c)* one month, *(d)* three months and *(e)* over three months. [13881]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I do not have the specific information my hon. Friend requests. Nevertheless, I am always happy to meet hon. Members to discuss issues of immigration policy and have held such discussions with at least 15 hon. Members since May.

If my hon. Friend wishes to have such a meeting with me, perhaps he could contact my Private Office.

Lewes Prison

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the occupancy level and age profile of prisoners within Lewes prison. [13784]

Ms Quin: Lewes prison has a Certified Normal Accommodation of 485 and an Operational Capacity of 496. On 31 October 1997 the prison held 487 inmates. An age breakdown for all prisoners held in the prison on 30 September is given in the table.

Population in Lewes prison on 30 September 1997, by age[1]

Age	*Number*
15—17	[2]5
18–20	[3]82
21–24	98
25–29	93
30–39	120
40–49	63
50–59	25
60 and over	3
Total	489

[1] Provisional figures.
[2] All on remand.
[3] 43 on remand.

Irish Republic (British Subjects)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for British passports have been received from persons born in the Irish Republic who are the children of British subjects, in the last six months. [14057]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The UK Passport Agency is unable to provide this information as the records that are kept do not differentiate between British subject passports issued to those born in or connected with the Irish Republic and those born in India who have that status by connection with former British India. The Agency can only confirm that 3,894 British subject passports were issued in the six month period May to October 1997. The status of British subject cannot be transmitted to a child born in the Irish Republic after 31 December 1948.

War Memorials

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take action to ensure the proper preservation of war memorials in circumstances where the church or other building in which they are located is destroyed or converted to other use. [13692]

Mr. George Howarth: Provision for the preservation or recording of memorials to the dead is contained in existing legislation concerning the development of burial grounds.

Under the Pastoral Measure 1983, if a disused Church of England church and churchyard is made the subject of a redundancy scheme, there is a requirement to give notice of the manner in which memorials are proposed to be disposed of and to offer relatives or the Commonwealth War Graves Commission the opportunity to make separate arrangements.

Where the memorials are removed, details, including a copy of the inscription and the date and manner of disposal, are to be lodged with the local council and copied to the Registrar General.

Hazardous Refuse

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he proposes to take to ensure that those who deposit syringes and other medical-related items of a potential health hazard in public places, or in domestic refuse containers, can be prosecuted. [13307]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

Under section 87 of the Environment Protection Act 1990, any person who drops and leaves litter in a public open space is committing a criminal offence and is liable to prosecution. Prosecutions may be brought by the Police or local authorities and upon conviction the litterer may face a maximum fine of £2,500. Local authorities may also issue fixed penalty notices to anyone who drops litter and refuses to dispose of it properly.

The term litter has a wide interpretation and we have no reason to believe that it would not include syringes and medical items. The offence relates to what is done with the material rather than what it is.

In addition, Section 46 of the Environment Protection Act 1990 enables local authorities to serve notice on householders requiring specified substances to be put in separate receptacles. Failure to comply with the provisions of this notice may lead to a summary conviction under section 46(6) of the Act.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Scientific Research and Development

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase investment in scientific research and development. [13027]

Dr. Howells: As part of our commitment to maintaining and enhancing research excellence in higher education, the funding package for higher education for 1998–99 announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 23 September will include an extra £125 million to maintain and improve quality and standards, and to make a start on the backlog of maintenance and equipment replacement for both teaching and research facilities.

In the longer term, decisions on funding for research in higher education, having regard to the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, will be taken in the light of the comprehensive spending review.

Classrooms

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many demountable classrooms or other temporary buildings are used for teaching at schools in the Colchester area; what is the age of the oldest such classroom; and what plans he has to replace them with permanent classrooms; [13697]

(2) how many schools in England and Wales are comprised solely of demountable classrooms; and if he will make a statement. [13698]

Mr. Byers: The information sought is not collected centrally.

The Government is concerned about the condition of many school premises. We have already begun to address the repairs and maintenance backlog. The Prime Minister announced on 30 September that £115 million would be spent by the end of this financial year. Over 2,000 schools will benefit. By the end of this Parliament, we expect an additional £2 billion to be spent as a result of the New Deal for Schools.

New Deal for Schools

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many schools were notified of new deal for school opportunities after the deadline for submitting bids was passed; [13742]

(2) what remedies he proposes to offer schools which were notified of new deal for schools opportunities after the deadline had passed; and if he will make a statement; [13743]

(3) if he will make special arrangements for those schools who received notification of New Deal for Schools money after the deadline for submitting bids had passed. [14096]

Mr. Byers: I understand that most schools received the Department's letter of 18 July about the New Deal for Schools (NDS) before the deadline. Schools were not being invited to bid, but were being informed that Local Education Authorities and the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS) would be bidding on their behalf.

The £83 million already distributed is only the first instalment of a larger programme announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his Budget. We expect a further £2 billion will be available over the lifetime of this Parliament for schools in England. We will be issuing bidding guidance shortly on the arrangements for the second tranche of NDS funding. All schools, including those that did not receive funding in the first round, will be able to submit bids to their LEAs, or the FAS in the case of Grant Maintained schools.

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for the private sector to lead partnerships for the organisation and delivery of the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds. [14449]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am pleased to announce the outcome of the competition to identify private sector organisation to lead partnerships for the organisations and delivery of the New Deal in both of the pathfinder districts of Hackney and City and South Humber. The successful organisation in Hackney and City is Reed Personnel Services and in South Humber, Action for Employment Ltd.

Because of the high quality responses within this competition, it has been decided that private sector organisations should be invited to lead the organisation and delivery of the New Deal in a total of ten locations—the two pathfinder districts and in eight new localities:

Colchester

Solihull

Leicestershire

Tyneside, North

Exeter and East Devon

Bridgend and the Glamorgan Valleys

West Lancashire

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland will make an announcement on the remaining District in due course.

Expressions of interest will be invited shortly, with a view to announcing the remaining lead private sector organisations to work with the Employment Service by the end of February.

Student Funding

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average funding per student in further education for students in *(a)* England, *(b)* Wales and *(c)* Scotland in each of the last five years. [14209]

Dr. Howells: The average funding per FEFC funded full-time equivalent student in further education in England (in £ cash rounded to the nearest £10) over the last four years (the 1992–93 figure is not on a comparable basis) was as follows:

1993–94: 2,820

1994–95: 2,810

1995–96: 2,670

1996–97: 2,570

Responsibility for further education matters in Scotland and Wales rests with my right hon. Friends, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales respectively.

Reception Classes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of four-year-olds in maintained reception classes had staffing ratios worse than 1 to 13 on 30 Janaury 1997. [14071]

Mr. Byers: Information about pupils and teachers in reception classes is not collected centrally.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many four-year-olds were in *(a)* maintained reception classes, *(b)* maintained nursery classes or schools and *(c)* voluntary and private settings (i) on 23 September 1997 and (ii) in January 1996. [14073]

Mr. Byers: The available information on four-year-olds in Janaury 1996 is shown in the following table.

Pupils aged 4 years of age in schools in England: January 1996

School type	*Pupils*[1]
Maintained nursery schools and nursery classes	154,982
Infant classes in Primary schools[2]	343,436
Independent schools[3]	27,413

[1] Full-time and part-time pupils aged 4 years at 31 December 1995 (born between 1 January and 31 December 1991).

[2] Includes reception and other classes.

[3] Includes pupils in direct grant nursery schools.

Information on four-year-olds in schools and private and voluntary provision on 23 September 1997 will be available towards the end of the year.

"Excellence in Schools"

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will make a statement on the written representation he has received on his White Paper, "Excellence in Schools" from the Hampshire Association of Parish and Town Councils; [13906]

(2) if he will list the parish and town councils from which he has received written representations in connection with his White Paper, "Excellence in Schools". [13907]

Mr. Byers: Our records show that, of the approximately 3,500 responses to the full version of the White Paper "Excellence in Schools", two were received from Parish and Town Councils or their representative bodies. The replies were from Hampshire Association of Parish and Town Councils (HAPTC) and Romsey Town Council.

HAPTC's response focused particularly on the principles of partnership and citizenship. Its contents have been taken into account as part of the analysis of all responses to the White Paper.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the total capital allocation for grant-maintained schools in England for each year since 1989. [13177]

Mr. Byers: The total capital allocations for grant maintained schools in England for each year since 1989 are as follows:

Financial year	*Capital allocations (£ millions)*
1990–91	8.5
1991–92	12.7
1992–93	32.2
1993–94	95.4
1994–95	122.0
1995–96	123.0
1996–97	138.0
1997–98	144.9

Free School Milk

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his policy on the provision of free milk for children of primary school age; and if he will make a statement. [13152]

Ms Estelle Morris: Where local education authorities and the governing bodies of grant-maintained schools in England provide drinking milk for primary-age children, they must provide it free of charge to pupils whose parents receive Income Support or income-based job seeker's allowance. We have no current plans to change these arrangements.

Public Footpaths

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many proposals for diversion or closure orders of public footpaths have been made to local education authorities since the publication of the report of the working group on schools security in May 1996. [13109]

Ms Estelle Morris: Proposals for the diversion or closure of public rights of way are considered by local highways authorities. Information about the number of such proposals submitted in respect of school premises is not collected centrally.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Pesticides

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the frequency with which national estimated daily intake calculations were performed for pesticide residues in each EU member state in each year since 1992. [13181]

Mr. Rooker: Estimated daily intake—EDI—calculations have been carried out in the United Kingdom as part of the pesticide approvals process in those cases where it appears that the acceptable daily intake—ADI—of residues in a food crop might be exceeded. For example, EDI calculations were made for chronic risk assessment purposes in preparing the paper "Unit to Unit Variation of Pesticide Residues in Fruit and Vegetables" which the Pesticides Safety Directorate published in March this year. However, precise information on how frequently these calculations have been carried out since 1992 would be available only at disproportionate cost.

Information on the frequency with which other EU member states carry out national EDI calculations is not held by the UK.

I will write to the hon. Member.

Fishing Rights

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much financial compensation has been provided by the European Community since 1987 for fishing rights in national waters of non-EC states; what total tonnage of fish and other stocks has been involved; what was the value of the stocks concerned at market levels; and what proportion of the tonnage was granted to British trawlers. [13852]

Mr. Morley: Details of the cost to the EU budget of fisheries agreements with third countries are provided in the table:

Cost of EU fisheries agreements with third countries

	ECU (million)
1987	81.9
1988	139.5
1989	161.5
1990	173.0
1991	171.4
1992	195.6
1993	188.9
1994	140.6
1995	158.1
1996[1]	270.0
1997[1]	246.3

[1] Budget appropriation. Final outturn expenditure figures not yet available.

The manner in which the fishing opportunities obtained in third country waters is expressed varies from agreement to agreement. Total vessel capacity, numbers of licences, reference tonnage's and numerical quotas are used either singly or in combination to describe the fishing opportunities available to Community vessels. It is not therefore possible to assess the total tonnage of fish stocks involved, the market value of the stocks concerned or the proportion granted to UK vessels.

On 30 October the Fisheries Council agreed a series of conclusions on future policy towards agreements with third countries, including the need for a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis.

Fisheries Council

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the outcome of the European Fisheries Council held on 30 October in Luxembourg. [14426]

Mr. Morley: I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of the Fisheries Council in Luxembourg on 30 October, together with my noble Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland. Under each agenda item decisions were taken which will enhance fisheries conservation.

The Council agreed by qualified majority, with Denmark voting against, a wide ranging package of technical measures designed to conserve fish stocks by reducing catches of juvenile fish and discarding.

Key features of the present arrangements, such as the areas closed to protect juvenile fish, will be maintained. The minimum mesh size for cod, haddock and other large-bodied species was confirmed at 100mm in the North Sea and North West of Scotland, and will increase, with special transitional arrangements, from 80mm to 100mm in other waters to the west and south of the United Kingdom. Other measures to increase the selectivity of fishing nets include a new requirement to use square mesh panels in nephrops nets and limits on twine thickness. In order to assist enforcement, there will also be limits on the number of nets of different mesh sizes that fishermen may use on a single trip, with the detailed rules on this aspect to be decided next year.

The rules on discarding will change in order to reduce the quantity of fish discarded. The minimum landing sizes of fish will be made more consistent with the mesh sizes used, again in order to reduce discarding. Minimum sizes have also been improved for shellfish stocks to give this sector added protection.

The new conservation rules will come into effect on 1 January 2000 so as to give fishermen time to adapt their fishing gear and practices. The Government has worked closely with the fishing industry in discussing technical conservation measures and the new rules respond to many of their concerns. As well as securing conservation gains, we successfully resisted proposals which would have undermined effective enforcement at sea.

The Council unanimously agreed conclusions on future policy towards fisheries agreements with third countries. As a result the European Commission will undertake a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of these agreements. In the meantime the Council has called upon the Commission to explore ways of ensuring that the agreements are coherent with general development policy and involve fishing opportunities set at sustainable levels. The Council has also called upon the Commission to examine the funding arrangements and to provide full evaluations before expiring agreements are renewed or new agreements sought. I fully support these conclusions which lay the foundation for a more soundly based future policy.

The Council unanimously adopted new rules on catch reporting in Western Waters to come into effect on 1 July 1998. These new rules make up the last enforcement element of the December 1994 Western Waters agreement on Spanish and Portuguese integration into the Common Fisheries Policy. They will strengthen enforcement but should not create significant additional burdens on fishermen because catch reports will be submitted along with the position reports which vessels have had to submit since 1996 when operating in Western Waters.

I used the opportunity of the Council to draw attention to the need to make progress on the Commission's long-standing proposal to phase out the use of drift nets on the high seas. I made it clear that the United Kingdom would seek to reach an agreement during its Presidency of the European Union next year, taking account of both environmental concerns and the needs of the fishermen who have hitherto participated in the fishery.

Arable Stewardship

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he intends to publish details of the proposed pilot schemes for arable stewardship.[14047]

Mr. Morley: We will be publishing a leaflet which explains the objectives of the arable stewardship pilot scheme and gives brief details of the measures, the location of the two pilot areas and the project officer contacts in the middle of November. It will be sent to all farmers in the pilot areas, members of the National Agri-environment Forum and other interested organisations. The detailed scheme literature and application forms will be available from 5 January 1998 when we will open the scheme to applications.

Pigs (Tail Docking)

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will ensure that the Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994 relating to the docking of pigs' tails is properly enforced by inspectors and veterinarians at abattoirs; and if he will make a statement; [13943]

(2) how many farmers have been prosecuted under the Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994 for the illegal docking of pigs' tails in *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97; and if he will make a statement. [13942]

Mr. Morley: I am keen to discourage the routine tail docking of piglets, a practice which is far too prevalent considering that the law only permits it in certain circumstances. I am considering how best to achieve this. No prosecutions relating to the docking of tails have been brought by MAFF under schedule 3 of the Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994 during 1995–96 or 1996–97. Prosecutions brought by local authorities or other bodies are not recorded centrally.

Fox Hunting

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the advice of the Forestry Commission on the hunting of foxes on Commission land; and if he will publish all the advice given. [14045]

Mr. Morley: The Forestry Commission is reviewing its policy on hunting over commission land, and we expect to receive its advice soon. This is an internal review and the advice will therefore not be published.

Pig Production

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received regarding the use of meat and bonemeal in continental pig production; and if he will make a statement. [14169]

Mr. Rooker: Representations have been received from UK pig farmers reflecting their disappointment at the differences between our own controls on feed and those imposed by our European partners.

Farmers in other Member States are permitted to feed meat and bonemeal (MBM) to non-ruminant livestock. In the UK, mammalian MBM has been prohibited from all farmed livestock feed, including pig, since March 1996. This extension of our ban, which formerly only applied to ruminant feed, was introduced on the specific advice of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee to avoid the risk of any cross-contamination between ruminant and non-ruminant feed. Such cross-contamination could lead to the perpetuation of the BSE epidemic in British cattle.

The UK has had far more cases of BSE than other Member States, and that is why we have a range of measures here which go considerably further than those taken elsewhere.

Dietary Supplements

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will invite the Committee on Toxicology of Chemicals in Food to reconsider the

research evidence on vitamin B6 in dietary supplements on which they based their advice, with special reference to the study by Dalton and Dalton; what assessment he has made of the criticism of the Committee's research evaluation; and if he will ensure that the members of the Committee have no interest which could be relevant to their advice. [14042]

Mr. Rooker: The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) has considered the data on the toxicity of vitamin B6 on two separate occasions. It is aware that the validity of some of the science on which its recommendation was based—including the study by Dalton and Dalton—has been questioned but it has not been persuaded that this issue needs to be looked at for a third time. The Government has every confidence in the rigour with which the COT reviewed the data and in the robustness of the recommendation it made. We see no reason to invite the Committee to reconsider the evidence.

Members of the COT are appointed by the Chief Medical Officer as independent scientific and medical experts on the basis of special skills and knowledge. However, it is inevitable that most experts will have gained experience by applying scientific and toxicological skills to address questions of a commercial nature. In order to ensure that these commercial interests do not conflict with the need to obtain independent expert advice, members are required to declare any commercial interests on appointment and, again, during meetings if a topic arises in which they have an interest. Details of the interests declared by COT Members have been placed in the Library. The Government is wholly satisfied with the integrity of the members of the COT and with the independence of its advice.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the Krebs report into the incidence of TB in the badger population and its impact on dairy and beef producers; and if he will publish the report in full. [14046]

Mr. Rooker: I expect to receive the report before the end of the year. The report will be published in full.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Small and Medium Enterprises

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the total number and percentage of businesses in *(a)* Tamworth and *(b)* Staffordshire with between (i) 0–9 employees, (ii) 10–49 employees, (iii) 50–99 employees, (iv) 100–249 employees and (v) 250–500 employees; and how many people are employed in each size band. [13889]

Mrs. Roche: The information is not kept in the form requested by my hon. Friend. However, data from the Annual Employment Survey showing size band distributions of employment in Tamworth and in Staffordshire are set out in the tables. A unit does not correspond to the terms "firm, company" or; "business", by which employers are sometimes identified, but is roughly equivalent to a workplace.

Employment size band	*Number of units*	*Percentage of units*	*Number of employees*	*Percentage of employees*
Tamworth				
1–10	501	60.8	1,999	10.4
11–49	222	26.9	4,987	26.0
50–99	55	6.7	3,850	20.1
100–199	35	4.2	4,634	24.2
200–499	9	1.1	2,543	13.3
500 or more	2	0.2	1,155	6.0
Total	824	100.0	19,168	100.0
Staffordshire				
1–10	15,091	72.9	57,937	16.3
11–49	4,386	21.2	97,718	27.5
50–99	648	3.1	44,910	12.6
100–199	350	1.7	47,790	13.4
200–499	165	0.8	50,349	14.2
500 or more	49	0.2	57,065	16.0
Total	20,689	100.0	355,766	100.0

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research her Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the growth and barriers to growth of small businesses; and what her Department has identified as the main barriers. [13892]

Mrs. Roche: The Department has commissioned the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Centre for Business Research of the University of Cambridge and Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC), to carry out research on growth constraints on Small and Medium Firms.

Management and employee development and expertise was found to be the key to sustained growth over a period of several years.

Particular constraints were:

- the level and depth of internal management capability and human resource development;
- internal resource management, particularly in relation to budgeting, costing, invoicing and payment procedures;
- the firm's management systems;
- insufficient awareness of the range of facilities of computer based IT systems as a cost/time saving management tool;
- the need to address skill shortages through effective training or recruitment;
- a too narrow customer/product base;
- the need for external providers of finance to be an enabling rather than constraining forces (as many firms in the study perceived them to be).

Coal

Caroline Flint: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received regarding the renewal of domestic coal contracts by the generating companies in 1998; and if she will make a statement. [13144]

Mr. Battle: I have received representations from one of the coal companies in respect of power station contracts being negotiated for the period beyond March 1998. The negotiations are primarily a matter for the private sector companies involved.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what proportion of late payment of debt she estimates is attributable to small businesses failing to pay other such businesses on time; and what research on this subject her Department have *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated; [13524]

(2) what research her Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated to quantify the effect on small businesses of late payment of debt. [13523]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Recent research undertaken by NOP showed that late payment causes serious problems for all businesses in the UK. As a direct result of late payment, 72 per cent. of those businesses surveyed have cash flow difficulties, 62 per cent. are less profitable, 45 per cent. are unable to grow and 41 per cent. say that their very survival is threatened.

The findings of a recent report undertaken by Trade Indemnity also showed that small businesses continue to suffer more from late payment than larger ones. Small businesses with a turnover of less than £1 million were found to have 29 per cent. of invoices outstanding compared to only 9 per cent. for businesses with turnover of £50 million.

In addition surveys by Grant Thornton, Lloyds Bank, The British Chambers of Commerce, Experian and Dun and Bradstreet have all shown that large firms are the worst payers with Experian identifying that large companies were two and a half times more likely to pay their bills late than small companies.

The Government is determined to promote a better payment culture in the UK. That is why we have responded to the calls from small businesses and announced a new package of measures to tackle late payment, including the introduction of legislation to provide a statutory right to claim interest on late payment of commercial debt.

Small Businesses

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list *(a)* the Ministers responsible for small businesses in each Government Department and the dates of their appointment, *(b)* the dates on which they have met and *(c)* the dates on which they are expected to meet during the next 12 months. [13522]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Firms employing fewer than 50 people contribute 99 per cent. of all UK businesses. All Government Ministers, therefore, have a responsibility to consider the impact on small firms of the policy and regulatory decisions made by their Department. As Minister with responsibility for small business, I deal directly with Ministers in a number of Government Departments on specific issues that are of particular concern to smaller firms.

The Access Business Ministerial Group, of which I am a member, is chaired by the Parliamentary Secretary of the Office of Public Service. This Group ensures that regulatory practise and advice and information, from both central and local government is as transparent, accessible and helpful as possible.

A Parliamentary Debate on small firms in Spring 1998 will provide an opportunity for all members to contribute their views on the role and importance of small businesses to the economy of the UK.

Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe

Mr. Letwin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on what date the Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe sold his BP shares. [13216]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe announced his intention to dispose of his shareholdings in BP in his statement of 5 August. He immediately instructed his bank to make the necessary arrangements which have now been completed.

Payment of Debts

Mr. Page: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she has taken to establish a reference point from which improvements in payment times for small businesses would be measured under a statutory right for interest. [13107]

Mrs. Roche: My Department will continue to monitor and analyse the findings of business surveys into payment times for small businesses. In addition my officials are discussing with the University of Bradford the establishment of a payment observatory which will monitor and report on payment trends including the lateness of payment. The observatory would also identify best practice in credit management so that small businesses can benchmark their own performance.

The Government has made it clear that the Commercial Debts (Interest) Bill is just one of a package of new measures that it will bring forward to promote a better payment culture in the UK. Central and Local Government will be required to publish tables of their actual payment performance and the Government has welcomed the announcement by the Federation of Small Businesses that they will publish league tables of the average payment times of public companies and their large private subsidiaries.

The Government fully recognises the importance of effective credit management procedures and is pleased that all the main small firms organisations have agreed to work with the Government to look at better payment practice.

Clean Coal Technology

Mr. Page: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) when she intends to introduce support for clean coal technology via the non-fossil fuel obligation process; [13106]

(2) what representations Her Majesty's Government have made to the Commission over the legality of providing clean coal technology support through the non-fossil fuel obligation process. [13105]

Mr. Battle: My Department is nearing completion of a major review of clean coal technology which has involved extensive discussions with industry, universities and a number of overseas organisations such as the International Energy Agency. The review covers future research,

development and demonstration requirements and has examined a range of funding options for such requirements, including the NFFO process. An announcement on the outcome of the review, our proposed future policy, and proposed consultation with the Commission, will be made once we have had time to consider the review's findings.

British Nuclear Fuels plc

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what guidelines her Department has issued to British Nuclear Fuels plc concerning future liabilities on overseas contracts. [13555]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* BNFL's commercial contracts with overseas customers for reprocessing services are underpinned by inter-Governmental agreements. Arrangements for implementing these contracts, including the accounting treatment, are a matter for the company. In relation to such contracts, I understand that the company, where applicable, makes prudent and appropriate provision for future liabilities that may arise, in accordance with generally accepted accounting policies. Full details of BNFL's accounting policies on, and provisions for, future liabilities are given in its Annual Report and Accounts.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the implications for nuclear safety of the projected merger between BNFL and Siemens. [13761]

Mr. Battle: Discussions between BNFL and Siemens concerning a possible joint venture company are at a preliminary stage. My Department is being kept fully informed of developments. Any undertakings concerned with nuclear operations will, of course, be subject to the applicable safety regulations.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what statutory instruments have been made during the summer Adjournment by her Department. [13553]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* My Department made, and laid, the following Statutory Instruments during the summer adjournment:

	Statutory Instrument
The Wireless Telegraphy (Short Range Devices) (Exemption) (Amendment) Regulations	S.I. 1997/1996
The Wireless Telegraphy (Network User Stations) (Exemption) Regulations	S.I. 1997/2137
The Public Telecommunication System Designation (ACC Long Distance UK Limited) (No.2) Order	S.I. 1997/2177
The Public Telecommunication System Designation (Coventry Cable Limited) Order	S.I. 1997/2178
The Public Telecommunication System Designation (Diamond Cable Communications (UK) Limited) Order	S.I. 1997/2179
The Public Telecommunication System Designation (Advanced Radio Telecom Limited) Order	S.I. 1997/2180
The Public Telecommunication System Designation (Radio Tel Systems Limited) Order	S.I. 1997/2181
The Fireworks (Safety) Regulations	S.I. 1997/2294
The Companies (Membership of Holding Company) (Dealers In Securities Regulations)	S.I. 1997/2306
The Gas Act 1986 (Exemption) Order	S.I. 1997/2427

In addition my Department made one further Statutory Instrument which is not subject to Parliamentary procedure:

The Export of Goods (United Nations Sanctions) (Sierra Leone) Order: S.I. 1997/2464.

Mixed Oxide Fuel

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what quantities of mixed oxide fuel have been transported from Sellafield to date for use in German nuclear power plants. [13740]

Mr. Battle: My Department's annual press release details the total exports of plutonium in the form of non-irradiated mixed oxide fuels. Copies of this, and previous releases, are available in the Library of the House. The most recent release, on July 31 1997, reported that 83 kg of plutonium were exported as MOX fuel, exclusively to Germany. Details of individual contracts remain commercially confidential.

Cable Operators

Mr. Timms: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will encourage cable operators to offer wireless as well as wired telecommunications services. [13114]

Mrs. Roche: The Broadcasting Act 1990 includes statutory provision for the use of wireless transmission by cable operators, and the licenses now being issued to franchise holders by the Independent Television Commission and my Department both allow this. The Government has allocated the 40.5–42.5 Ghz band for this purpose.

The Government has allocated spectrum within the 2,3,4 and 10 Ghz bands to other wireless telecommunication operators. The ability to deliver broadband services to premises also has considerable potential for improving communications, particularly in rural areas, and the Government is considering the best way forward in further encouraging such networks, including the use of wireless.

India

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the current level of trade between Britain and India. [13922]

Mrs. Roche: In 1996, trade in goods and services between Britain and India was worth £4.1 billion, 7 per cent. higher than a year earlier. The value of UK exports of goods and services increased by 1.5 per cent. to £2.1 billion while UK imports rose by 14 per cent. to £2.0 billion.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she next plans to visit India. [13925]

Mrs. Beckett: I shall be visiting India from 16–18 November this year.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the current level of staffing at the India desk of her Department. [13923]

Mrs. Roche: Currently 13 people are allocated to the India desk.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will estimate how many British firms have offices in India. [13924]

Mrs. Roche: Although no precise information is available, it is estimated that there are at least 300 British firms with offices in India.

Pakistan

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the current level of trade between Britain and Pakistan. [13926]

Mrs. Roche: In 1996, trade in goods and services between Britain and Pakistan was worth £1.1 billion, 7 per cent. higher than a year earlier. The value of UK exports of goods and services increased by 6 per cent. to £590 million while UK imports rose by 8 per cent. to £545 million.

Quadrant Catering

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received concerning the selling of Quadrant Catering by the Post Office; and if she will make a statement. [13668]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My right hon. Friend has received a number of representations about the future of Quadrant, the catering business of the Post Office, from members of the Communication Workers Union either directly or through Members of Parliament. Quadrant Catering Limited was established as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Post Office on 29 September. My right hon. Friend's consent is required under the British Telecommunications Act 1981 to the sale of shares in Quadrant Catering Limited to a private sector partner to establish a joint venture operation.

Telemarketing

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps are being taken to eliminate the sending of unsolicited faxes from telemarketing companies. [13484]

Mrs. Roche: The EU Distance Selling Directive, which should be implemented by June 2000, will prohibit suppliers such as telemarketing companies from sending faxes to consumers without their prior consent. I will consult on implementation of this Directive early next year. In the meantime, people can register with the Fax Preference Service (FPS). The companies who subscribe to it undertake that they will not sent unsolicited faxes to any consumer who registers with the FPS.

Export Credit Insurance

Sir Richard Body: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the costs to public funds of the United Kingdom acceptance of the European Council directive on the harmonisation of the main provisions concerning export credit insurance for transactions with medium and long-term cover. [12513]

Mrs. Beckett: The ECGD has carried out a full and thorough assessment of the costs associated with implementing this Directive. Taken as a whole, the effects of the Directive as currently drafted are broadly cost neutral for the UK Government and will not result in any additional burden to UK tax payers. A detailed analysis of the costs involved is set out in Explanatory Memorandum 9507/97 COM (97) 264 which was submitted to the House of Commons and House of Lords Scrutiny Committees on 7 October.

SCOTLAND

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the suppliers to his Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13544]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* All Departments are required to pay all their bills within agreed contract terms, or 30 days from receipt of the goods or service or a valid invoice, whichever is later, where no such terms exist. Such detailed information on payment performance for the current financial year could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dayell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will consider amending the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill to permit a Scottish court to sit overseas to try those accused in respect of Lockerbie. [13213]

Mr. McLeish *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The Government remain committed to trial of the two Libyan accused in Scotland or the United States and it would therefor be inappropriate and unnecessary to amend the criminal procedure legislation.

Beta Interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the cost of prescribing beta interferon in each year since 1995 for each health board. [13477]

Mr. Galbraith: The information for Scotland for the financial years 1995–96 to 1997–98 is shown in the table.

The costs shown for prescriptions dispensed through community pharmacies are based on the value of ingredients before the addition of dispensing fees or deduction of any discount or patient charges.

In order not to disclose information that may relate to an individual patient, the data are presented on a national basis.

	Cost (£)		
	1995–96	*1996–97*	*April–August 1997*[1]
Cost of prescriptions for beta interferon dispensed through community pharmacies:	—	27,465	87,418
Cost of prescriptions for beta interferon dispensed in hospitals:	1,894	171,462	56,890
Scotland	1,894	198,927	144,308

[1] Provisional.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the total cost to date of external consultancies associated with the specification of the proposed private finance initiative contract at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS trust; and from which budgets these costs have been met. [12746]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS Trust has to date incurred £3.4 million for fees for external advice in connection with the New Royal Infirmary PFI project as detailed in the table. The costs have been met by the Trust from its own resources, including non-recurring revenue grants from The Scottish Office.

Fees incurred for:	*£000*
Design	1,455
Financial	398
Legal	1,258
Others	288
Total	3,399

Community Care

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his policy regarding future provision of community care; and if he will make a statement. [12701]

Mr. Galbraith: The successful delivery of community care services depends on effective joint working between health, social work and housing agencies and on their making the best use of resources available to them including, for example, purchasing from the private and voluntary sectors. We are reviewing the various elements of community care funding and the Government are setting up a Royal Commission to review the arrangements for funding the long-term care of the elderly. We are preparing improved guidance on procedures for assessing the needs of older people and will consult later this year on how best to promote and improve joint working.

Local Government Electorate

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the electorate of each ward in each local authority area in Scotland. [12697]

Mr. Chisholm: The electorate for local government elections in each ward of each local authority area in 1997, drawn from information held by the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland, is set out in a table which has been placed in the Library.

Post-operative Care

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his policy regarding the provision of post-operative care; and if he will make a statement. [12700]

Mr. Galbraith: Responsibility for determining the range of services needed to meet all the health care needs of their population rests with Health Boards. That general principle applies to post-operative care.

The national clinical audit database lists more than 80 local audit projects on post-operative care from Health Boards and Trusts covering a wide range of specialties and professions. This information is available to all hospitals as a means of disseminating good practice and avoiding duplication of effort.

WALES

River Dee Crossing

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the impact upon the economy of *(a)* Deeside and *(b)* North East Wales, of opening the new River Dee crossing. [13315]

Mr. Hain: None. Flintshire County Council are responsible for this scheme.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he estimates the new River Dee crossing will be open to public traffic; and when he expects the official opening will take place. [13313]

Mr. Hain: Flintshire County Council are responsible for this scheme. They estimate completion before Christmas.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the cost to date of building *(a)* the new River Dee crossing and *(b)* associated approach roads. [13314]

Mr. Hain: Flintshire County Council are responsible for this scheme. The Welsh Office has to date provided support of some £64 million under the Transport Grant arrangements.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the annual number of vehicles which will use the River Dee crossing; and if he will make a statement. [13316]

Mr. Hain: Flintshire County Council are responsible for this scheme. They estimate average daily flows of 21,100.

Transport Grants

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make it his policy to reduce the current disparity in the funding of Welsh transport grants between urban and rural Wales; and if he will make a statement. [13171]

Mr. Hain: All local authorities in Wales are invited to bid for transport grant and each scheme submitted is assessed on its merits against the grant criteria. I will ensure that all projects submitted by rural authorities are given fair consideration against these criteria.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make it his policy to include economic development effects within cost-benefit analyses when awarding transport grants in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [13174]

Mr. Hain: Economic development effects do not form part of the standard cost-benefit analyses used to assess road schemes. However, they form part of the wider Transport Grant criteria upon which projects are assessed.

Welsh Assembly

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make it his policy to bring the strategic planning authority for public transport for Wales under the remit of the Welsh Assembly; and if he will make a statement. [13172]

Mr. Hain: There is no strategic planning authority for public transport for Wales. However, the Government are currently consulting on an integrated transport policy. The Government's policy on devolution is that the Welsh Assembly will take over virtually all the functions of the Secretary of State for Wales. The functions, including those with respect to public transport, will be set out in an order that will be made under the Act which establishes the Assembly.

General Practitioner Lists

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many patients were removed from general practitioners lists by *(a)* county and *(b)* health authority in each of the past five years. [14212]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The presently available information, for the years 1993–94 and 1994–95, is given in the table:

Patients removed from general medical practitioners lists

FHSA[2]	*Patients removed because of act or threat of violence*		*Patients removed at request of GP*[1]		*Patients transferred at request of patient*	
	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
Clwyd	4	8	458	288	1	n/a
Dyfed	—	12	91	93	2	2
Gwent	—	9	520	442	4	5
Gwynedd	—	9	46	77	—	2
Mid Glamorgan	n/a	20	518	347	8	13
Powys	—	—	11	12	—	—
South Glamorgan	n/a	33	1,407	1,150	24	22
West Glamorgan	n/a	6	479	527	9	25
Wales	n/a	97	3,530	2,936	48	n/a

Notes:
[1] Excluding those recorded under first category.
[2] Currently available data are for 1993–94 and 1994–95 for former Family Health Service Authorities.
n/a = not available.
Source:
GMP Census Additional Data Collection 1994–95, Department of Health 1996.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Civil Litigation

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what research his Department has conducted into the requirement, in terms of the likely success or merits of a case, for the instigation of civil proceedings by a litigant; what criteria correspond to current usual practice; and if he will make a statement. [13772]

Mr. Hoon: The decision whether to litigate and the criteria applied to judge the likely success or merits of the case are matters for the client on the professional advice of his lawyer if he has one. I have not commissioned research into this specific area but my Department has commissioned a number of research projects which look generally at why people choose to litigate.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what criteria and methods his Department intends to use to measure the probability of success in cases of civil litigation; and if he will make a statement. [13719]

Mr. Hoon: The decision whether to litigate and the criteria applied to judge the likely success or merits of the case are matters for the client on the professional advice of his lawyer if he has one.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what consultations his Department has held with members of the insurance industry, and related experts, on the subject of arrangements for insurance civil litigants who will be able to litigate using the intended extension of the conditional fee agreement; what were the conclusions of such discussions; and if he will make a statement. [13715]

Mr. Hoon: My officials are in discussion with interested parties, including representatives of the insurance industry, about the range of issues connected

with the extension of conditional fees, and not least the provision of insurance against the potential liability for an opponents costs and who should meet those costs.

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what consultations his Department is holding on plans for changes in the legal aid and civil justice system; which bodies he is willing to accept representations from; and what the deadlines are for consultation on each aspect. [13717]

Mr. Hoon: I include a table showing the consultation papers that are presently planned. In many cases the dates are provisional and may be changed in the light of circumstance.

I welcome representations from anybody who wishes to contribute and not simply the professional bodies, special interest and consumer groups who are routinely consulted. Copies of consultation papers are available without charge from my department and can also be found on the Internet (www.open.gov.uk/lcd/index.htm) and responses can be made by e-mail.

Civil justice reform	*Issue date*	*Responses required by*
Clinical negligence procedures	Paper issued on 31 October 1997	31 December 1997
Multi-party situations	Paper issued on 31 October 1997	31 December 1997
Specialist jurisdictions (Chancery, Admiralty, Official Referees etc.)	Planned for November 1997	Expected to be end of January 1998
Small claims limit and fast track limit	Planned for November 1997	Expected to be end of January 1998
Civil court fees	Planned for November 1997	Yet to be decided
Fast track costs and fixed costs	Planned for April 1998	Expected to be end of July 1998
Extension of conditional fees	Planned for January 1998	Yet to be decided
Changes to scope of civil legal aid	Planned for January 1998	Yet to be decided
Legal Aid reform proposals for introducing contracts and a revised merits test	Consultation will take place during the first half of 1998	It is planned to complete the consultation by end of June 1998

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what are the expenditure implications of the changes in *(a)* training, *(b)* staffing and *(c)* information technology required for the implementation of those of Lord Woolf's civil justice proposals which Her Majesty's Government intends to implement by April 1999. [13714]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to the Hon. Member.

Letter from Michael Huebner to Mr. John Burnett, dated 3 November:

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your Question about the costs of Lord Woolf's Civil Justice proposals.

We are currently working out the detailed implications of the effects of the changes on (a) training, (b) staffing and (c) information technology of the Lord Chancellor's recent announcement on the Middleton Review, but are not yet in a position to give specific expenditure figures. However, although there will be implementation costs in the short term, they will be in line with the Government's commitment to remain within current expenditure plans and therefore will be absorbed within existing budgets.

Conditional Fee Cases

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many conditional fee cases his Department has monitored in drawing up plans for changes in the legal aid and civil justice systems; if he will publish such research; and if he will make a statement. [13716]

Mr. Hoon: My Department was represented on the working group that oversaw the research commissioned by ACLEC from the Public Studies Institute the results of which were published by the PSI on 23 September 1997. Copies of the research are available from PSI. The solicitors who provided information to PSI had entered into 837 agreements at the time the research took place and provided details of 197 agreements for analysis.

Special Advisers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the Minister to whom each is responsible, indicating the subjects on which they advise. [12329]

Mr. Hoon: There are currently no special advisers in this Department.

Solicitors (Complaints)

Mr. Amess: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will introduce measures to provide for a statutory complaints procedure against solicitors. [12604]

Mr. Hoon: The department has no plans to create a new complaints handling body. The Office for the Supervision of Solicitors was set up by the Law Society in September 1996 and I agree with the Legal Services Ombudsman that it will take two to three years before the Office can be properly judged by results.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Haulage Companies

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress in securing compensation for United Kingdom haulage companies which suffered losses as a result of the industrial action around French ports during the summer. [13038]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have no information on claims for compensation in respect of the dispute which blocked some French Ports in April 1997. It may be that hauliers have claimed directly from the French. We are in

close touch with the French authorities over the outstanding claims for compensation in respect of the lorry blockade in November 1996.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the consistency of road traffic regulations in different member countries of the EU which affect United Kingdom haulage companies. [13034]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Most EU legislation on road haulage is aimed at completing the single market in transport: even where agreements have been reached there is often some scope for variations and exemptions between States. There are also, in practice, some differences in interpretation of EU legislation and inconsistencies in its application. By contrast, much other road traffic legislation is better made at national level taking account of the differences in road condition, driver training, penalties and enforcement in individual Member States.

Differences may include the side of the road on which traffic passes, maximum lorry weights, speed limits, the provisions of various national highways codes, priorities at roundabouts, night-time, weekend and bank holiday lorry bans, lorry routeing, and the requirement to pay tolls or purchase *vignettes*. There are also various more specialised requirements such as documents or markings on the vehicle giving details of weights and dimensions of the vehicle and the threshold for requirements to notify police authorities and highway agencies of abnormal loads. The penalties are those laid down in national penal codes.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on how many occasions since 1 May Her Majesty's Government have protested to other EU member states about the treatment of United Kingdom lorry drivers by local police or other authorities in their countries; and if he will make a statement. [13036]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have written on 16 occasions to the governments of other Member States following requests from UK hauliers for assistance. Most of these were in relation to disputed fines.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if, at the third conference of the parties to the climate change convention in December, he will support the Africa Group's proposals for fair shares in respect of a global limit on emissions. [13013]

Angela Eagle: The Government recognise the importance of long-term reductions in emissions taking into account issues of equality and the need for developing countries to develop their economies and combat poverty. The proposals of the Africa Group merit consideration as one of a number of approaches to the long-term control of greenhouse gas emissions. In the meantime we believe that developed countries must take the lead and agree at Kyoto to making legally binding significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions after 2000. The EU proposal for a 15 per cent. reduction in emissions by 2010 provides the best way of achieving this.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will press at the third climate change convention in December for all industrialised countries to cut their emissions of greenhouse gases by 20 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2005. [13014]

Angela Eagle: At the Third Conference of the Parties in Kyoto, the Government will be supporting the EU proposal that developed countries reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases by 15 per cent. below 1990 levels by 2010, and by at least 7.5 per cent. by 2005. The Government think that it is important that Kyoto sets a target for 2005, and we believe this figure strikes the right balance between ambition and achievability.

Green-belt Land

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for changing the restrictions on the use of green-belt land. [13029]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's Green Belt policy is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note (PPG)2. There are no current plans to revise this PPG.

Disabled Persons (Badges for Motor Vehicles)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons a minimum age of five years was adopted for the award of an orange badge for parking purposes; and what plans his Department has to review this rule. [13004]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The minimum age for eligibility for an Orange Badge is two years; this is laid down in the Disabled Persons (Badges for Motor Vehicles) Regulations 1982. The reason is that children below this age will often be carried in a pram or pushchair, whether they are disabled or not. We keep the operation of the Orange Badge Scheme under review but we have no plans at present to change the eligibility criteria.

Housing (Provision of Services)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he is considering for changes in the allocation of responsibility for the provision of transport and other services, with special reference to water for new housing developments, particularly in rural areas. [13007]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no current plans for changes. We are, however, looking at these and other issues mainly in the context of the work on our integrated transport strategy and in our consideration of the responses to last year's green paper on household growth.

Housing (Rented Accommodation)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what proportion of the projected increase in demand for housing is for rented accommodation; [13009]

(2) what estimates he has made of future changes in the demand for rented accommodation; and what evidence these are based on. [13010]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department published a paper in May 1995 ("Provisional for Social Housing—Background Analysis: Households in England, their Housing Tenure and the Housing Stock, 1991–2001") analysing the way in which population changes and household growth might alter the demand for housing in England by main tenure over the period 1991 to 2001. This indicated a newly arising need for social housing of between 60,000 and 100,000 units per annum.

The range of demand for additional social housing was calculated by taking the Department's official projection of the growth in household numbers over the 10-year period and subtracting estimated growth in owner occupation. Estimates were based essentially on past trends. The methodology assumed that overall size of the private rented sector would remain unchanged over the 10-years (though in practice it has expanded). Specific adjustments were made for Right To Buy sales, demolitions, etc.

In November 1995, my Department commissioned the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Cambridge to undertake a feasibility study to develop an economic model of the demand and need for social housing in England between 1996 and 2006. A technical report on this study will be published shortly.

Radioactive Substances

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Enviornment, Transport and the Regions what action has been taken to reduce discharges of the radioactive substance technetium 99 from the Sellafield reprocessing plant. [13023]

Angela Eagle: Under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 all discharges of radioactivity from the Sellafield site are authorised by the Enviornment Agency. British Nuclear Fuels plc (BNFL) has applied to the Environment Agency to vary its discharge authorisations for the Sellafield site. The application includes a reduction in the maximum permitted levels of technetium-99 discharges to sea.

In July, BNFL provided additional information to the Environment Agency in support of its application in respect of its aerial discharges. The Environment Agency is considering the additional information.

My Department has received requests for the application to be called in by the Secretary of State for his own determination. These requests are being considered.

The Government are committed to ensuring the best practicable means are used to limit radioactive discharges. Indeed, the Government agreed to comply within a request to demonstrate to the OSPAR Commission how the UK is meeting the obligations of the OSPAR Convention with respect to reducing discharges and eliminating any pollution from discharges of technetium-99 from Sellafield to the Irish Sea.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to implement the objectives of the OSPAR Convention in respect of *(a)* protection from the harmful effects of ionising radiation, *(b)* prevention of marine pollution caused by radioactive discharges and emissions and *(c)* continuous reduction of discharges of radioactive substances. [13024]

Angela Eagle: Discussions are continuing within OSPAR, in which UK officials are involved, on the form of an objective with regard to radioactive substances and a strategy to achieve that objective. This will form part of the conclusions of the OSPAR Ministerial Meeting being held next summer. In the meantime, the UK is continuing to comply with all its international obligations on the protection of the environment, the public and workers from harmful effects of ionising radiation.

The UK is also continuing to develop and use the Best Available Techniques to prevent pollution of the marine environment from inputs of radioactive substances. We indicated at the OSPAR meeting in September our wish to make progress on the question of reducing nuclear discharges to the marine environment and to work with our OSPAR colleagues to find a way of committing all countries to this action.

Housing Needs

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) on what evidence his Department's projections of the increase in the number of households by the year 2016 are based; [13028]

(2) what representations he has received concerning the accuracy of the projected increase in the number of households by the year 2016. [13067]

Mr. Raynsford: Descriptions of the methodology and main statistical assumptions underlying the household projections to 2016 are set out in the annexes to "Projections of Households in England in 2016", published by the Stationery Office in March 1995. A copy of this publication is in the Library of the House.

My Department has received many representations about the accuracy of the household projections and they have been subject to considerable scrutiny since their publication. Much of this work has been published, for example by the Environment Committee in evidence for its report on Housing Need in 1996. Further discussion of the household projections was given in the Green Paper, "Household growth: where shall we live?" which was published last November and the Government are currently considering the responses to that consultation. I am satisfied that the projections were the best that could be made with the available data and that they accurately reflect recent trends.

Telephone Kiosks

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement concerning the extent of planning controls over the installation of telephone kiosks, with particular reference to security implications in the neighbourhood of potential terrorist targets. [13120]

Mr. Raynsford: The installation of telephone kiosks under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 is subject to a prior approval procedure, whereby operators must give the local planning authority the opportunity to say whether they

wish to approve, within 28 days, details of the siting and appearance of the installation. An authority may refuse such approval, if they consider this to be justified. Architectural Liaison Officers (or Crime Prevention Design Advisers in the Metropolitan area) are available in police forces to give advice on crime prevention through environmental design. Such advice may include specific and detailed suggestions about the design of buildings, or general advice about estate design or the siting of particular features.

Salvage Tugs

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to alter the arrangements for stationing of salvage tugs around the United Kingdom coastline; and if he will make a statement. [13147]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Three Government-funded vessels are on station to provide emergency towage primarily for the Dover Strait, North-West Scotland and the South-West Approaches. The current contracts expire on 31 March 1998. The future provision of emergency towing vessels is being considered as part of the Department's Comprehensive Spending Review. A decision will be announced as soon as possible.

Development Plans (Eastern Region)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which district council draft development plans the Government office for the eastern region has commented on since 1 May. [13126]

Mr. Raynsford: Since 1 May the Government Office for Eastern Region has commented on the following local plans:

Colchester: parts of the pre-consultation draft.

South Cambridgeshire, Suffolk Coastal: pre-deposit consultation.

East Cambridgeshire, Norfolk Waste Plan, South Norfolk: deposited plans.

Basildon, Epping Forest, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, St. Edmundsbury, Tendring, Thurrock: proposed modifications to deposited plans following public local inquiries.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which draft county structure plans the Government Office for the Eastern region has responded to since 1 May. [13125]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government Office for Eastern Region commented on the pre-deposit consultation draft of the Replacement Essex Structure Plan in July 1997.

Asbestos

Dan Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress the Government have made on banning the supply of asbestos products. [13169]

Angela Eagle: The Health and Safety Commission has advised Ministers on a mechanism and timetable for introducing a domestic ban on the import, supply and use of asbestos products. I will be making an announcement in the near future on how the Government intend to proceed.

Right to Roam

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the consultation paper on the statutory right to roam will be published. [13127]

Angela Eagle: Shortly.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many representations he has received concerning English Nature's proposal to de-notify the Thame and Hatfield moors SSSI site *(a)* in favour of the proposal and *(b)* against the proposal. [13145]

Angela Eagle: The Secretary of State has received 120 representations against English Nature's proposals to de-notify parts of Thorne and Hatfield Moors Sites of Special Scientific Interest. There have been no letters of support to date.

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the SSSI sites reviewed by English Nature in each year from 1990 indicating which had the SSSI status removed as a result of the review. [13143]

Angela Eagle: Since the creation of English Nature in 1991, officers have made over 10,000 visits to SSSIs. As a result of these visits, English Nature had de-notified 14 entire SSSIs comprising 11 notified solely under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, and three notified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

A larger number of other SSSIs have also been subject to partial de-notification and extensions as a result of these visits.

The figures by each year are:

De-notifications

	1949 Act	*1981 Act*	*Area (ha)*
1991–92	0	0	—
1992–93	5	0	291
1993–94	2	0	5
1994–95	3	3	169
1995–96	0	0	—
1996–97	0	0	—
1997–98 (so far)	1	0	10

Local Government (Grant)

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the level of Government grant to each metropolitan authority and London borough in the current financial year. [13478]

Mr. Raynsford: The Metropolitan authorities and London boroughs have reported the following amounts of central Government grants in 1997–98.

£ thousand

	Budget estimates		
	Grants inside AEF[1]	Grants outside AEF[2]	Total grants inside and outside AEF[3]
Metropolitan authorities			
Bolton	114,021	48,786	162,807
Bury	56,112	28,524	84,636
Manchester	287,674	152,739	440,413
Oldham	110,403	36,536	146,939
Rochdale	92,003	39,966	131,969
Salford	106,920	48,281	155,201
Stockport	71,359	46,532	117,891
Tameside	86,659	37,060	123,719
Trafford	75,888	34,673	110,561
Wigan	106,964	38,951	145,915
Knowsley	92,054	29,878	121,932
Liverpool	281,070	175,514	456,584
St. Helens	70,939	30,729	101,668
Sefton	106,053	61,088	167,141
Wirral	133,470	67,542	201,012
Barnsley	81,337	31,823	113,160
Doncaster	125,733	36,905	162,638
Rotherham	107,942	36,379	144,321
Sheffield	213,416	80,296	293,712
Gateshead	88,632	35,748	124,380
Newcastle upon Tyne	133,801	60,964	194,765
North Tyneside	77,263	37,845	115,108
South Tyneside	73,239	26,102	99,341
Sunderland	135,361	52,324	187,685
Birmingham	571,291	234,825	806,116
Coventry	135,036	62,494	197,530
Dudley	96,310	32,362	128,672
Sandwell	144,085	46,945	191,030
Solihull	57,431	21,391	78,822
Walsall	126,039	32,811	158,850
Wolverhampton	118,432	48,681	167,113
Bradford	243,975	88,784	332,759
Calderdale	77,000	31,530	108,530
Kirklees	144,337	63,428	207,765
Leeds	282,456	120,692	403,148
Wakefield	114,713	39,020	153,733
London Boroughs			
City of London	69,201	1,821	71,022
Camden	149,841	101,576	251,417
Greenwich	149,078	58,827	207,905
Hackney	198,612	111,769	310,381
Hammersmith and Fulham	111,704	65,392	177,096
Islington	147,417	77,327	224,744
Kensington and Chelsea	80,188	70,890	151,078
Lambeth	200,684	110,426	311,110
Lewisham	164,851	76,780	241,631
Southwark	186,138	87,241	273,379
Tower Hamlets	211,219	60,116	271,335
Wandsworth	150,316	77,154	227,470
Westminster	158,450	94,723	253,173
Barking and Dagenham	83,667	26,768	110,435
Barnet	110,992	89,616	200,608
Bexley	79,065	37,201	116,266
Brent	158,708	128,863	287,571
Bromley	84,551	69,992	154,543
Croydon	125,850	87,900	213,750
Ealing	137,960	95,539	233,499
Enfield	127,697	70,368	198,065
Haringey	149,419	132,819	282,238
Harrow	69,839	46,556	116,395
Havering	69,991	27,548	97,539
Hillingdon	91,578	39,672	131,250
Hounslow	110,340	54,242	164,582
Kingston upon Thames	40,923	28,927	69,850
Merton	58,662	35,907	94,569
Newham	202,838	117,951	320,789
Redbridge	102,593	64,269	166,862
Richmond upon Thames	32,014	34,734	66,748
Sutton	61,467	28,774	90,241
Waltham Forest	128,164	91,372	219,536

[1] Grants inside AEF include Specific and Special grants inside AEF, SSA Reduction Grant and Revenue Support Grant.
[2] Specific and Special Grants outside AEF.
[3] Total Specific and Special Grants inside and outside AEF.

Cabinet Committee on the Environment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Cabinet Committee on the Environment last met. [13514]

Mr. Prescott: Details of proceedings of Cabinet committees are not published, in accordance with the second exemption of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Cycling

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the actions taken by his Department since 1 May to increase provisions for cyclists and increase cycle use. [13503]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on 27 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *723–24*.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the number of cycles in the United Kingdom and the distance travelled yearly by them in each of the past five years. [13669]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Figures (shown below) are only available for Great Britain. The number of household bicycles is estimated using the National Travel Survey, and the distance travelled is estimated from the Road Traffic Census. No estimates of the distance cycled off-road are available.

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Number of bicycles (millions)	15.6	15.7	16.3	17.4	18.3
Distance travelled (billion kilometres)	4.7	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.3

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the total mileage, for each London borough, of existing dedicated cycle routes and the distance planned for 1998–99; and when he expects the planned 1,000 mile route system in London to be completed. [13670]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The 1,500 mile London Cycle Network (LCN) being developed by the 33 London boroughs, with financial support from the Government, comprises dedicated routes, shared routes and signed routes along lightly trafficked roads. A summary table showing miles of existing and planned LCN routes by borough, which includes dedicated routes, is set out below, but specific information on dedicated routes is not held centrally. Approximately one third of the network has been implemented and it will be completed as resources allow.

Miles of existing and planned LCN routes in London

Authority	*Existing length (miles) at April 1997*	*Planned (miles) 1997–98*	*Planned (miles) 1998–99*[1]
Barking and Dagenham	19.8	3.7	4.3
Barnet	23.1	6.8	0.0
Bexley	8.3	9.9	8.1
Brent	13.8	3.7	20.5
Bromley	35.8	7.5	17.4
Camden	11.2	3.1	4.4
City of London	0.0	0.0	0.0
Croydon	20.0	9.9	6.8
Ealing	40.6	3.7	3.1
Enfield	10.5	1.9	1.2
Greenwich	19.8	6.2	0.6
Hackney	11.7	3.1	3.7
Hammersmith and Fulham	21.4	5.0	4.3
Haringey	12.8	0.6	6.8
Harrow	2.0	3.1	6.2
Havering	5.1	2.5	4.4
Hillingdon	33.8	10.6	11.8
Hounslow	30.9	6.8	12.4
Islington	11.8	0.6	0.0
Kensington and Chelsea	5.1	2.5	2.5
Kingston upon Thames	25.9	5.0	3.1
Lambeth	4.7	6.2	1.9
Lewisham	8.4	1.9	4.3
Merton	15.0	3.7	6.8
Newham	1.9	13.7	19.3
Redbridge	17.2	0.0	2.5
Richmond	40.6	9.3	6.8
Southwark	14.0	6.2	0.0
Sutton	18.6	0.6	6.2
Tower Hamlets	13.4	1.2	1.9
Waltham Forest	22.9	6.2	9.3
Wandsworth	36.8	0.6	4.4
Westminster	7.4	0.0	0.0
Totals	564.30	145.80	185.00

[1] Dependent on availability of funding. In addition there are 8.6 miles of Thames Cycle Route to be introduced by a number of boroughs in 1997–98 and a further 12.4 miles in 1998–99.

Standard Spending Assessment (Review)

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the independent review of the standard spending assessment; and when the report will be published. [13393]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department has not set up an independent review of standard spending assessments. The calculation of standard spending assessments is regularly discussed with the Local Government Association in the Standard Spending Assessments Sub-group. In addition, the review of local government finance, which is being carried out in consultation with the Local Government Association, is considering the role of needs assessment in the allocation of central government grant to local authorities. I expect this part of the review to report next spring.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the level of Government revenue support grant allocated to each metropolitan and London authority for each child in local authority care; [13873]

(2) if he will list the level of grant allocated to each local authority for the care of the elderly. [13874]

(3) if he will list the average level of grant per child received by each authority for the provision of primary and secondary school education. [13875]

(4) if he will list the average rate of grant per head received by each authority for the care of elderly persons in each local authority. [13876]

Mr. Raynsford: Revenue Support Grant is paid to authorities in support of their general revenues. It is not allocated for particular purposes.

Grants specific to particular kinds of expenditure are the responsibility of my right hon. Friends, the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment and for Health.

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if standard spending assessments will continue to be used as the primary basis for capping; what assessment he has made of the appropriateness of using SSA as a basis for measurement; and what proposals he has to facilitate better long-term planning by local authorities in respect of capping. [13896]

Mr. Raynsford: We are committed to ending crude and universal capping as soon as possible. We announced in July a review of local government finance which, among other things, will help to put in place the changes needed to deliver that commitment. In the meantime, capping will remain in place in 1998–99 and capping guidelines will be announced shortly.

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy that future years capital financing standard spending assessments will reflect the true cost of financing capital schemes. [13897]

Mr. Raynsford: We are considering a range of possible changes for next year to make the SSAs fairer. We shall do as much as is compatible with our commitments on public expenditure.

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take into account in his SSA review the problems of local authorities with a low tax base. [14198]

Mr. Raynsford: The Review of Local Government Finance is considering, among other things, the way in which the Revenue Support Grant takes account of the needs and taxbase of authorities.

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each of the last five years the amounts of capital receipts which *(a)* have been released and *(b)* are planned to be released by each local authority. [13026]

Mr. Raynsford: Under the Capital Receipts Initiative, the Government will begin to release additional resources to local authorities to meet pressing housing need. Copies of individual authorities' illustrative entitlements in 1997–98 and 1998–99 have been placed in the Library.

Households

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what evidence his Department's projections of the increase in the number of households by the year 2016 is based in respect of *(a)* each region and *(b)* each county of the south-east region. [13696]

Mr. Raynsford: Descriptions of the methodology and main statistical assumptions underlying the household projections to 2016 are set out in the annexes of "Projections of Households in England to 2016", published by the Stationery Office in March 1995. A copy of this publication is in the Library of the House.

Projections were published for every county, metropolitan district and London borough. Separate household projections were made independently for each of these projection areas, based on sub-national population projections compiled by the Office for National Statistics (formerly OPCS), and these are calibrated to ensure consistency with the regional and national projections.

Civil Aviation Authority

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce his decision on the future of the Civil Aviation Authority; and what are his plans for its eventual privatisation. [13746]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are considering, with colleagues, the options for the future of the National Air Traffic Services of the Civil Aviation Authority. Privatisation is one of the options under consideration. We shall announce our decision in due course.

Regional Airports

Mr. Stringer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the wider benefits to the regional economy of granting transatlantic fifth freedom rights to selected far and middle east carriers in respect of United Kingdom regional airports. [13364]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is normal practice for the Department to ask the CAA to carry out an economic analysis before air services negotiations. This covers a range of factors including, where appropriate, benefits to the regional economy, and is taken into account by the Department in its strategy for the negotiations.

Houses in Multiple Occupation Registration Scheme

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the counties in England and Wales which *(a)* have and *(b)* have not implemented a houses in multiple occupation registration scheme. [14210]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not currently available. Since 3 March 1997, local housing authorities in England and Wales have been free to adopt registration schemes for houses in multiple occupation, which conform to models prepared by the Secretary of State, without the need to notify or obtain prior approval from central Government.

The Government are committed to introducing a national licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation. The coverage of the existing registration schemes will be a relevant issue in formulating proposals for such a scheme and we will be collecting this information from local authorities in due course.

Advice and Family Centres

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what provision he is making to supply low-income families with more advice centres and family centres. [13733]

Mr. Raynsford: The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) supports a range of locally led community projects which include the provision of advice, family and community centres and other initiatives of benefit to low-income families. Round 4 of the SRB Challenge Fund has been specifically recast to target it more effectively on those in the greatest need.

More generally, the need to spend on local authority services is reflected in local authorities' Standard Spending Assessments which are used for the distribution of Revenue Support Grant. Decisions on spending priorities are a matter for each local authority.

County Services Standard Spending Assessment

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the county services block SSA; and if he will include in it an economic index element. [14197]

Mr. Raynsford: This has been discussed with the Local Government Association this year. We expect to announce our proposals for SSAs for 1998–99 at about the beginning of December.

Housing (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the total capital receipts to be released to each London borough and over what period; and what proportion will be spent on housing. [13496]

Mr. Raynsford: Subject to Royal Assent to the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill, the entitlement of each London borough under our Capital Receipts Initiative in 1997–98 and 1998–99 is set out in the attached table. These additional capital resources will be available to local authorities to support housing, and housing associated regeneration works. Final decisions about the application of these resources, however, will be for individual local authorities. Decisions about the release of resources under the Capital Receipts Initiative over the longer term will be taken in the context of our Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the total housing deficit for affordable housing for each London borough. [13497]

Mr. Raynsford: There are no official estimates of either the current or future housing need for London boroughs.

The Department has released estimates of housing need for England as a whole. In 1995 the Department released estimates of housing need for England which projected the newly arising need for social housing at between 60,000 and 100,000 units per year over the period 1991–2001 and research was commissioned in 1995 to develop an economic model of housing need. This work was undertaken by the Department of Applied Economics, Cambridge University (DAE). The report on this feasibility research is expected to be published later this year. DAE have been commissioned to undertake further research on the model including work to explore the possibility of regional estimates of housing need.

Global Warming

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his Department's current estimate of the rate of global warming; and what are their current predictions for 1998 and the subsequent five years. [13498]

Angela Eagle: Over the next century, the rise in global average temperatures caused by the net effect of warming due to man-made emissions of greenhouse gases and cooling due to man-made sulphate particles is expected to be some 0.2 degrees Celsius per decade. This is the consensus view of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Due to the large natural variations in temperature between years, the Government does not make predictions of global average temperatures for specific future years.

Homelessness

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what measures he is taking to ensure that as few families as possible are forced to live in bed-and-breakfast accommodation; [13730]

(2) what measures he is taking to ensure that as many homeless families as possible are provided with permanent accommodation. [13732]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government are committed to placing a new duty on local authorities to protect those who are homeless through no fault of their own and are in priority need.

As soon as possible after being elected to office, we made regulations which require local housing authorities to give reasonable preference in the allocation of social housing to people who are being accommodated temporarily—or who have recently been assisted to secure accommodation themselves—by the authority under the homelessness legislation. These regulations (SI 1997 No 1902, made under Part VI of the Housing Act 1996) come into force on 1 November and restore the link between homelessness and the allocation of long-term settled accommodation.

Moreover, as the Chancellor announced in the Budget, under the Capital Finance Initiative, £784 million will be made available in support of additional capital spending on housing needs in England in 1997–98 and 1998–99.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he is taking to ensure that bed-and-breakfast accommodation for homeless families is clean, safe and comfortable. [13731]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government encourage local housing authorities to explore all alternatives before resorting to bed-and-breakfast establishments to provide temporary accommodation for homeless families. The Code of Guidance on parts VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996, to which authorities must have regard by law, states that authorities should ensure that bed-and-breakfast accommodation meets the statutory requirements on standards for houses in multiple occupation.

We are determined to improve standards in houses in multiple occupation. We are preparing a new Code of Practice which will take account of the findings of research into fire risks in houses of multiple occupation which were published by my Department on 30 October. We are also committed to introducing a national licensing system for houses in multiple occupation.

London Underground

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the options currently under consideration for increasing investment in London Underground; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the Coopers and Lybrand report compiled for his Department. [12981]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are considering a wide range of options for public/private partnerships to increase investment in London Underground, while ruling out wholesale privatisation. The Government's advisers, Price Waterhouse, have examined debt funding with public ownership; partnership structures which could involve a Trust, a joint venture concession or partial sale of the business, or a full concession; and operational structures which could involve a single business, vertically integrated line businesses or separating infrastructure from operations. The Government are also considering options for increasing investment in the short term. I have no plans to place Price Waterhouse's work in the Library, but will consider what background information should be made available when policies and decisions are announced.

Railways (Public Service Obligation Grant)

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what proportion of the turnover of the 25 train operating companies was derived from the public service obligation grant in each year; [12883]

(2) what proportion of Railtrack's turnover was derived from the public service obligation grant paid to the train operating companies in each year; [12881]

(3) what proportion of the turnover of the three rolling stock leasing companies was derived from the public service obligation grant paid to the train operating companies in each year. [12882]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Public Service Obligation grant has been replaced by Support for Passenger Rail Services (SPRS), paid by the Franchising Director to the 25 train operating companies (TOCs). SPRS is not hypothecated to cover particular types of expenditure, so it cannot be directly identified as the source of payments made by TOCs to Railtrack or to the rolling stock leasing companies (ROSCOs). In addition to SPRS, the TOCs receive income from PTEs, from fares paid for passenger services and from payments made for other services.

The table provides details, for each year since the TOCs, Railtrack and the ROSCOs were created, of SPRS and PTE payments to the TOCs, access and leasing charges paid by the TOCs, and Railtrack and ROSCO turnover.

Passenger grants paid to TOCs, etc.[1]

£ million cash prices

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
SPRS payments	1,783	1,669	1,809
PTE payments	346	362	290
Total public support to TOCs	2,129	2,031	2,099
TOCs' income from passenger fares[2]	2,171	2,379	2,582
Passenger access charges	1,955	2,003	2,119
Railtrack turnover	2,275	2,300	2,437
Passenger leasing charges	800	[3]—	[3]—
ROSCO turnover	800	[3]—	[3]—

[1] All figures for payments and charges are for the passenger railway industry as a whole. They do not reflect the position of individual TOCs, e.g. Gatwick Express receives no public support.
[2] TOCs' income from other sources is not readily available.
[3] Information may be available from the Registrar of Companies, Companies House, Crown Way, Cardiff, CF4 3UZ.

Housing Developments (Affordable Housing)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the powers he has to require private developers to provide a proportion of affordable housing in new housing developments; [13006]

(2) what assessment he has made of the adequacy of local authorities' powers to ensure that new developments include a sufficient proportion of affordable housing. [13008]

Mr. Raynsford: The courts have held that a community's need for a mix of housing types—including affordable housing—is capable of being a material consideration in the determination of planning applications by local authorities or the Secretary of State or appeals by the Secretary of State. The courts have also held that the Government's statements of planning policy are material considerations which must be taken into account, where relevant, in decisions on planning applications or appeals.

The Department's current policies on how the planning system can contribute to the overall supply of affordable housing are set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: Housing, as supplemented by Circular 13/96. On 24 July 1997 the Government issued for consultation a draft revision of Circular 13/96. The consultation period ended on 3 October 1997. My Department is currently analysing the responses.

Local Authority Services (Funding)

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the financial provision for local authority services per head of population for each local authority in England in the current financial year. [13395]

Mr. Raynsford: Data on 1997–98 Standard Spending Assessments per head of population for each local authority in England is contained in the "Standard Spending Assessment Handbook 1997/98", a copy of which is available in the Library. Table 1 of the Handbook gives figures for total SSA per head and Table 2b gives SSAs by major service block.

Opencast Coal Mining

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress of the review of opencast coal mining in England; what consultations he has had with representatives of voluntary and community groups over the review; and if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards opencast coal mining. [13660]

Mr. Raynsford: We published a consultation paper on the review of planning policy for opencast coal on 30 July 1997. The paper sought views on the issues raised by the 10 point plan for opencast coal, which we prepared when in opposition, and the options for change. The closing date for comments is 31 October. We have to date received a number of comments, including 12 from voluntary or community groups and 32 from members of the public. In the light of responses to consultation the Government will decide what changes to policy guidance could and should be implemented in interim planning guidance, which would better be accommodated in a full review, planned for 1998, of Minerals Planning Guidance Note 3 (Coal Mining and Colliery Spoil Disposal) and whether any legislative changes are necessary.

Railway Passengers

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions at what level of passenger in excess of capacity the Rail Regulator is required to consider sanctions on a train operating company; and what plans he has to review this figure. [13052]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Passengers in Excess of Capacity (PIXC) levels are set by the Franchising Director at 3 per cent. across all morning and evening peak services, and 4.5 per cent. across either peak in isolation. These maximum levels are below the average level of overcrowding experienced during the last 10 years of British Rail operation. There are no plans to change these standards, but each train operating company is kept under regular review by OPRAF.

Passenger counts must be carried out by an OPRAF-approved independent body at least once a year to monitor operator's compliance with PIXC standards. The Franchising Director can instruct an operator to carry out a feasibility study on the most effective method of increasing capacity if it seems likely that because of an increase in demand the operator will be unable to meet the PIXC requirements using existing records.

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the number of passengers in excess of capacity on rail passenger safety. [13053]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. All rolling stock is designed to operate safely, even when fully loaded. Overcrowding in itself is not a safety hazard. The Passengers in Excess Of Capacity levels set by the Franchising Director are intended to maintain reasonable levels of passenger comfort at peak times.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the suppliers to his Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13552]

Angela Eagle: All departments are required to pay all their bills within agreed contract terms, or 30 days from receipt of the goods or service or a valid invoice, whichever is later, where no such terms exist. Such detailed information on payment performance for the current financial year could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 29 July regarding the black country development corporation—Ref. PT/EE/P50/10996/97; and what are the reasons for the delay. [13202]

Angela Eagle: I wrote to the hon. Member yesterday. The delay was primarily due to the need to consider all the responses to the consultation on the proposed Statutory Instruments to secure the wind-up of the Urban Development Corporation.

Transport Works (Blight)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish the *(a)* report on blight caused by transport works commissioned by the former Secretary of State for Transport and *(b)* the University business school compulsory purchase review. [13208]

Mr. Raynsford: I anticipate receiving the final report of the Interdepartmental Working Group, which was set up to consider the scope, cause and effects of blight arising during the various stages of major infrastructure projects, shortly. Once I have received the report I will consider arrangements for its publication. I hope to release the report of the research undertaken by the City University into the operation of compulsory purchase orders at the same time.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend planning policy guidance in respect of the erection of telecommunication masts. [13211]

Mr. Raynsford: Planning guidance on telecommunications is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 8 (Department of the Environment, December 1992) (PPG8). We have no immediate plans to

review the basic approach of the PPG to the erection of telecommunication masts. Work is in hand with representatives of local planning authorities and telecommunications code system operators to review the working of the Code of Best Practice for Telecommunications Prior Approval Procedures as applied to Mast/Tower Development, which was published by my Department last year.

Railways (Freight)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the rail lines operated for freight purposes only, giving the mileage length of each line identified. [13027]

Glenda Jackson: As at 31 March 1997, 1,632 kilometres of railway line were available only to freight traffic. Details of individual lines are held by Railtrack rather than the Government.

Genetic Modification

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the commercial and non-commercial interests of the members of the Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification. [13183]

Angela Eagle: We do not have information on the commercial and non-commercial interests of members of the Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification (ACGM); nor on any members of the Health and Safety Commission's advisory committees. Such information is not sought by the HSC when members are appointed to committees. The ACGM was set up by the HSC to provide it with expert advice in relation to all aspects of the contained use of genetically modified organisms. Members are nominated by the CBI, TUC and other bodies according to the tripartite principle applicable to all HSC advisory committees.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what controls exist to ensure that companies retain parental lines of genetically-modified seed varieties granted consent for release for field testing or marketing. [13182]

Angela Eagle: The marketing and experimental release of GM plants, including seeds, requires consent from the Secretary of State under the Genetically Modified Organisms (Deliberate Release) Regulations. Consents may be subject to conditions, which could include conditions with respect to the retention of parental lines. In addition, statutory controls exist over the marketing of all seed of the main agricultural crops, whether genetically modified or not. The effect of these controls is that the seed of parental lines of hybrid varieties can only be produced by or under the control of the person responsible for maintaining the variety.

Rolling Stock Companies

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the level of profits relative to turnover enjoyed by the rolling stock companies; and if he will make a statement; [13205]

(2) what plans he has to regulate further the activities of the rolling stock companies. [13206]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are currently reviewing regulation of the railways as a whole. As part of the review, we are examining the current performance and future operation of the rolling stock leasing market.

Local Authority Reorganisation

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he will make available to authorities that have been or are to be reorganised on 1 April 1995, 1996, 1997 or 1998 for reorganisation costs incurred by them in 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [14067]

Ms Armstrong: On 18 July I invited authorities that have been or are to be reorganised on or before 1 April 1998 to submit estimates of the amount of expenditure they expect to incur on transitional costs of reorganisation in 1997–98. On the basis, inter alia, of the information provided by the authorities, I have decided the revised maximum amounts that it would be appropriate to allocate towards such costs in 1997–98. In the initial round priority was given to authorities that were reorganised on 1 April 1997 and will be reorganising on 1 April 1998; I have adopted the same priorities for the mid year stage of the scheme. The majority of the authorities to be reorganised in 1998 requested at the beginning of the scheme that allocations in respect of redundancy be deferred until this round. Accordingly, the allocations listed below for authorities reorganising in 1998 are intended to cover redundancy costs.

The amounts are as follows:

Authority	*Maximum amounts: £000s rounded 1997–98*
1996 reorganisations	
Hartlepool Borough Council	1,400
Redcar and Cleveland Council	1,300
Middlesbrough Borough Council	1,500
Stockton on Tees Borough Council	1,300
Bristol City Council	1,100
Bath and North East Somerset Council	1,700
North Somerset Council	1,000
South Gloucestershire Council	1,200
Kingston upon Hull Council	1,200
East Riding Yorkshire Council	2,500
North Lincolnshire Council	1,200
North East Lincolnshire Council	1,900
York City Council	800
Total	18,100
1997 reorganisations	
Bedfordshire County Council	1,000
Luton Borough Council	3,500
Milton Keynes Borough Council	3,000
Derbyshire County Council	650
Derby City Council	2,950
Bournemouth Borough Council	2,900
Poole Borough Council	3,000
Durham County Council	350
Darlington Borough Council	2,000
East Sussex County Council	1,800
Brighton and Hove Council	4,000
Hampshire County Council	1,600
Portsmouth City Council	2,600
Southampton City Council	3,200
Leicestershire County Council	1,100
Leicester City Council	3,100

Authority	Maximum amounts: £000s rounded 1997–98
Rutland Council	1,160
Staffordshire County Council	720
Stoke on Trent City Council	2,600
Wiltshire County Council	400
Swindon Borough Council	2,000
Total	43,630
1998 reorganisations	
Berkshire County Council	4,100
Bracknell Forest Borough Council	2,100
Newbury District Council	2,400
Reading Borough Council	3,000
Slough Borough Council	2,600
Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead	2,200
Wokingham District Council	3,500
Hereford and Worcester County Council	2,300
Hereford City Council	250
Leominster District Council	350
Malvern Hills District Council	600
South Herefordshire District Council	200
County of Herefordshire District Council (shadow)	'3,000
Worcestershire County Council (shadow)	'2,300
Malvern Hills District Council (shadow)	'385
Devon County Council	3,000
Plymouth City Council	2,900
Torbay Borough Council	3,400
Essex County Council	2,800
Southend on Sea Borough Council	2,950
Thurrock Borough Council	2,850
Nottinghamshire County Council	2,400
Nottingham City Council	3,100
Cheshire County Council	2,500
Halton Borough Council	2,500
Warrington Borough Council	3,300
Shropshire County Council	2,100
The Wrekin District Council	3,000
Kent County Council	3,200
Gillingham Borough Council	400
Rochester City Council	600
Medway Towns Council (shadow)	'3,000
Cambridgeshire County Council	1,400
Peterborough City Council	3,400
Lancashire County Council	2,800
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	3,200
Blackpool Borough Council	3,000
Total	87,085
Combined total allocations	148,815

' Supplementary Credit Approval to be issued. The figure includes SCA issued in May 1997.

Isle of Wight Council, Buckinghamshire and Dorset County Councils did not submit bids.

HEALTH

NHS Capital Prioritisation

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health according to which criteria the national health service executive's capital prioritisation advisory group will assess health service need; and which agencies will be asked to contribute to this assessment. [12600]

Mr. Milburn: The National Health Service Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group will be responsible for determining the criteria for assessing health service need. It is expected that the criteria will include the ability of schemes to deliver benefits such as improved quality of clinical services, better access to services, development of training teaching and research, and improved environment.

Preliminary assessments are expected to be made by NHS Executive regional offices and the NHS trusts and the health authorities concerned. These assessments will be reviewed by the NHS Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group.

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the capital prioritisation exercise by the national health service executive's capital prioritisation advisory group will begin; who will be consulted; and when the results are expected to be announced. [12599]

Mr. Milburn: The National Health Service Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group's first exercise will be to prioritise those schemes wishing to go forward in the second tranche of the Private Finance Initiative, which we expect to announce in the spring.

The process for prioritisation has yet to be finalised. Details will be announced before the of the year, following which work on this first exercise will begin.

Cannabis

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the cost to the national health service of the abuse of cannabis. [13178]

Ms Jowell: It is not possible to assess the costs related to a single drug.

Hospital Car Park Charges

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospital trusts charge their patients for parking on hospital sites in the west midlands; and what is the scale of charges. [13690]

Mr. Milburn: National Health Service trusts are free to make their own decisions about whether charges for car parking should be made in the light of particular local circumstances. The information on exactly how many do is not collected by the Government.

The majority of NHS hospital trusts in the West Midlands Region charge users for car-parking on hospital sites. Of the few that do not, some are now looking carefully at and, in at least one case, consulting on this option. Charges are generally in the region of 50p to £1.00 per day; considerably less than standard car parks or parking meter fees.

Patients who are eligible, under the Hospital Travel Costs Scheme, to claim reimbursement of travelling expenses to and from hospital may also be able to have car parking charges reimbursed.

Step-parents

Mr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have for legislative recognition of the claim of lesbian and gay co-parents to be equivalent to those of step-parents. [14362]

Mr. Boateng: Section 14 of the Adoption Act 1976 only permits a joint adoption application to be made by a man and woman married to each other; co-habiting couples are therefore excluded from making a joint

application but an application may be made by one of them. Decisions about the child's placement for adoption will always be determined by the welfare and needs of the child. The Government have no plans to amend the relevant sections of the Act.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his estimate of *(a)* the cost to each local authority of subsistence payments to asylum seekers since January 1997 and *(b)* the number of people each authority has made payments to. [13671]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not comprehensively available for the period January 1997 to date. Three special grants were made available to local authorities for 1996–97 in respect of their expenditure on support for: adults, families and unaccompanied children. The table below details the amount of grant paid to individual authorities for supporting adult asylum seekers and unaccompanied children in 1996–97 and the estimated expenditure incurred from 1 January to 31 March 1997 by authorities claiming a grant for supporting asylum seeking families.

Grants will be available for 1997–98 subject to Parliamentary approval. Full details of authorities' expenditure will not be known until claims for the grants are received.

Information is collected week by week on the numbers being supported by authorities in London. The latest available information, for the week ending 17 October, is that London authorities were supporting 6,707 single adults and 4,006 families (for some authorities the latest information was for a prior week and has been included in the total with no change). Regular data on the numbers of asylum seekers accommodated are not provided by authorities outside London.

Grants paid to local authorities in 1996–97

Local authority	*Grant paid to local authorities in 1996–97 for supporting asylum seeking adults* £	*Estimated cost to local authorities in supporting asylum seeking families 1 January to 31 March 1997* £	*Grant paid to Local authorities in 1996–97 for supporting unaccompanied children* £
Barking and Dagenham	19,334.53		
Barnet	61,898.53	253,429.00	
Barnsley	1,534.96		
Berkshire	40,171.00		
Bexley	6,699.01		
Birmingham	14,842.98		
Brent	326,173.35	256,392.00	
Bromley	3,283.57		
Buckinghamshire	1,909.99		
Cambridgeshire	24,319.00		
Camden	612,150.00	308,054.00	
City of York	820.71		
Cornwall	2,831.88		
Corporation of London	33,000.00	25,490.00	2,044.00
Croydon	177,987.69	208,716.00	
Dorset	660.00		
Ealing	131,596.00	140,800.00	
East Sussex	9,219.44		
Enfield	11,881.90	113,300.00	
Gateshead	1,554.12		
Greenwich	26,086.73		
Hackney	186,658.54	101,750.00	

Grants paid to local authorities in 1996–97

Local authority	*Grant paid to local authorities in 1996–97 for supporting asylum seeking adults* £	*Estimated cost to local authorities in supporting asylum seeking families 1 January to 31 March 1997* £	*Grant paid to Local authorities in 1996–97 for supporting unaccompanied children* £
Hammersmith and Fulham	536,021.00	284,815.00	
Hampshire	500.24		
Haringey	177,045.00	238,917.00	
Harrow	224,547.00	89,533.00	
Hereford and Worcester	2,414.54		
Hertfordshire	11,628.07		
Hillingdon	15,613.75		2,224,300.00
Hounslow	26,331.65	110,646.00	
Islington	186,285.00	36,850.00	
Kensington and Chelsea	346,823.39	138,167.00	425,986.00
Kingston	12,527.00		
Lambeth	531,480.00	187,786.00	
Leeds	15,345.00		
Leicester	3,737.50		
Lewisham	117,383.00	111,000.00	
Lincolnshire	1,052.36		
Manchester	19,225.28		
Merton	57,820.66	44,785.00	
Middlesborough	3,926.77		
Newcastle	8,403.97		
Newham	84,476.33	588,623.00	
Northampton	990.00		
Oxfordshire	15,510.00		
Redbridge	82,283.00	237,200.00	
Richmond upon Thames	13,397.17		
Rochdale	480.00		
Southwark	222,090.00	233,881.00	
Suffolk	2,778.00		
Sutton	23,203.51		
Tower Hamlets	120,210.00	125,300.00	
Waltham Forest	20,774.72	70,773.00	
Wandsworth	104,795.00	208,131.00	
West Sussex	6,793.03		
Westminster	936,344.04	152,077.00	347,669.00
Total	5,626,849.91	4,266,416.00	2,999,999.00

Total figures may not be exact due to rounding.

Basildon and Thurrock Hospital Trust

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what was the membership of the selection-interviewing panel for the vacant non-executive posts of the Basildon and Thurrock hospital trust; [13728]

(2) on what basis and to what extent the selection panel gave separate job descriptions for the two vacant non-executive posts on the board of the Basildon and Thurrock hospital trust. [13729]

Mr. Milburn: The membership of the selection/interviewing panel for the two vacant non-executive posts of the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals National Health Service Trust was:

Mr. Geoff Jennings, Chairman, Havering Hospital NHS Trust

Mr. Ian Macpherson, Chairman of Basildon and Thurrock NHS Trust

Mr. Iain MacDonald, Employee Relations Manager, New Holland Tractors

Mr. Ian Robertson, Non-Executive Director South Essex Health Authority.

The advertisement for the two posts indicated that one of the appointees would be expected to chair the trust's audit committee and would need to have appropriate skills. However, separate job descriptions were not given to those interviewed.

Health Service (London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to be able to announce the results of the review of London's health service; and if he plans to keep the review group in existence afterwards. [13499]

Mr. Milburn: The Independent Advisory Panel is expected to report to me shortly. Their advice and the Government's response will be published in due course. No decision has yet been made about the future existence of the Panel.

Young People in Care

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made towards the establishment of a new national organisation for young people in care; and if he will make a statement. [14070]

Mr. Boateng: A feasibility study commissioned by the Department of Health on the setting up of a new national organisation for young people in care and care leavers has recently been completed. The report of the study has been submitted to the Department and is under consideration.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will set up working parties with *(a)* surgical and other hospital equipment manufacturers, *(b)* trusts, *(c)* royal colleges and *(d)* other bodies to devise appropriate solutions to the millennium compliance problem; [13939]

(2) what representations he has had from trusts, royal colleges and other bodies about the impact of the millennium compliance problems relating to hospital equipment. [13938]

Ms Jowell: The National Health Service Executive set up a Year 2000 "helpline" in July 1996. Since that time, the helpline has received over four hundred calls and in response has provided information, advice and guidance to those working in the NHS. The current rate of calls is in excess of ninety per month.

The NHS Executive has made arrangements to meet with staff representing all NHS organisations, their suppliers and professional groups. The clinical professions will need to be involved particularly in making and carrying out contingency plans where critical services are affected.

The Medical Devices Agency (MDA) has received a number of requests from Trusts for advice on the Year 2000 issue as it may apply to medical equipment. MDA will shortly be issuing guidance on the appropriate action by device users and manufacturers.

MDA's guidance will ask medical equipment manufacturers to identify any of their products which are affected by Year 2000 problems and to make this information available to users and other interested parties, with an indication of the appropriate remedial action.

We are satisfied that, at this stage, there is no need to set up working parties in relation to the Year 2000 issue as it may apply to medical equipment in particular.

We will require that any trust or health authority which has not got its systems ready and fully tested should notify the department by 31 December 1998.

The primary responsibility of the NHS always has been and will be patient safety.

Correspondence

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons he has not replied to the letter from the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon on the administration of the National Blood Transfusion Service; and when he plans to do so. [13773]

Mr. Milburn: My noble Friend the Minister of State has written to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon today. The hon. Member will appreciate that the considerable interest in all areas of the country which the review of the Liverpool Blood Service has provoked has led to a marked increase in the amount of representations which we have received on this and related issues, all of which require appropriate consideration.

DEFENCE

Recruitment

12. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on the current levels of recruitment to the armed forces. [11745]

Dr. Reid: The Government is committed to addressing the very serious legacy of undermanning which it inherited on 1 May. Recruitment to the Armed Forces is one of our top priorities and whilst I would not wish to give a false sense of security, I am glad to report encouraging signs of improvement, particularly in respect of recruitment in the Army.

Eurofighter

13. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State when he expects the Royal Air Force to commence taking delivery of operational Eurofighter aircraft. [11746]

Mr. Spellar: The first aircraft is scheduled to be delivered to the Royal Air Force at the end of 2001.

18. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on the future of the Eurofighter programme. [11752]

22. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State when he expects to announce an order for production of Eurofighter. [11756]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friends to the answer given by my right hon. Friend to my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr. Olner) earlier today.

Defence Medical Services

15. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement about the future of the defence medical services. [11748]

Dr. Reid: The Government is committed to providing effective and efficient medical support to the Armed Forces in peace and war. We are well aware of the serious problems being experienced by the Defence Medical Services and have ordered an urgent reappraisal of current arrangements with a view to tackling the deplorable legacy we have inherited.

Defence Diversification Agency

16. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to establish an arms diversification agency. [11749]

32. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to publish his plans for a defence diversification agency. [11767]

Mr. Spellar: I refer my hon. Friends to the reply I gave earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson).

Comprehensive Spending Review

17. **Mr. Wells:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's contribution to Her Majesty's Treasury's comprehensive spending review with particular reference to its impact on the United Kingdom's strategic response. [11751]

Mr. George Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review is my Department's contribution to the Comprehensive Spending Review. At the strategic level, we are committed to strong defence through NATO and the maintenance of our nuclear deterrent. This forms part of the framework of the Strategic Defence Review.

Low Flying

19. **Mr. Ainger:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what studies are being undertaken to examine the benefits of low flying to RAF active service operations. [11753]

Mr. Spellar: Experience of recent conflicts confirmed that low flying continues to be a vital tactic in the penetration of hostile air defences. There are currently no specific studies into the benefits of low flying, but the need is kept under continuous review.

Alcohol Misuse

20. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what new proposals he has to reduce alcohol misuse in the armed forces. [11754]

Dr. Reid: Drunkenness is an offence under the Service Discipline Acts and is taken very seriously by the Armed Forces. All three Services already have comprehensive packages, available to all personnel, to combat alcohol misuse in addition to measures taken to limit drinking in Service establishments. These measures are kept under review and amended and re-focused as necessary.

Electric Batteries

21. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about purchase by his Department of electrical batteries. [11755]

Mr. Spellar: Batteries are purchased by many budget holders in the Ministry of Defence, either directly or as part of other projects, to meet the needs of all three Services. In all cases, a range of factors is taken into account including safety, storage and maintenance, disposal, and integration into other defence equipment. There are stringent tri-service procedures to ensure that any new battery or modification to existing batteries is an acceptable addition to the Department's range of codified batteries. Wherever possible, value for money is sought through competition against performance specifications, taking account of both initial purchase and through life costs.

Strategic Defence Review

23. **Mr. Clappison:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on the conclusions of his strategic defence review in respect of the Army. [11757]

Dr. Reid: We have received many written submissions to the Strategic Defence Review addressing the Army. We have placed in the Libraries of both Houses copies of those submissions whose authors have agreed that we should do so. No conclusions have yet been reached.

24. **Mr. Beard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the Government's strategic defence review in defining the circumstances in which British forces are likely to be called into action. [11758]

Dr. Reid: The Strategic Defence Review is considering generic missions which the Armed Forces should be able to undertake to meet our foreign and security policy objectives. It is not defining particular circumstances in which they might be called into action. Decisions on the commitment of forces would take into account a range of factors, including of course our national and international obligations.

25. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to announce the results of the defence review. [11759]

Dr. Reid: Work on the Strategic Defence Review is expected to be completed around the turn of the year. It will then be considered by Ministers and the results published in a White Paper as quickly as possible thereafter.

26. **Mr. Prior:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he last met industry representatives to discuss the progress of the strategic defence review in respect of the Army. [11760]

Dr. Reid: The Secretary of State has not met industry representatives to discuss aspects of the Strategic Defence Review relating to the Army. My right hon. Friend has, however, met industry representatives to discuss broad procurement matters in the context of the Review. The last occasion was on 29 October when he chaired the National Defence Industries Council, whose agenda was dedicated to Review issues.

29. **Mr. Martin Bell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the strategic defence review, with particular reference to the problems of overstretch. [11763]

Dr. Reid: The Government is fully committed to alleviating the question of overstretch, one of the main problems facing our Armed Forces, and we have already introduced a number of initiatives to address the related issue of undermanning. By matching capabilities to commitments, the Strategic Defence Review is aimed at further addressing this problem.

Royal Marines

27. **Mr. Streeter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to visit the Royal Marines in Stonehouse, Plymouth, to discuss their role in the strategic defence of the United Kingdom [11761]

Dr. Reid: Rather than visiting three Commando Brigade's Headquarters in Stonehouse, Plymouth, I plan to see them on exercise and to be briefed on the Royal Marines' roles and capabilities during their Winter Training in Norway on 24 and 25 February next. I was extensively briefed on these matters when I visited the Commando Training Centre on 16 September.

Nuclear Weapons

28. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the impact of the 1996 world court judgment on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons on British nuclear strategy. [11762]

Dr. Reid: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 19 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *261*.

Territorial Army

30. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future role of the territorial armed forces units. [11764]

Dr. Reid: The future role and structure of the Territorial Army is being considered in the Strategic Defence Review as part of our work on the Armed Forces as a whole. It would be premature to assess the likely outcome of the Review before the process is complete.

Former Yugoslavia

31. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Britain's contribution to the multinational stabilisation force in the former Yugoslavia. [11766]

Dr. Reid: The Government is justly very proud of the highly effective contribution that British troops continue to make to the mission of the Stabilisation Force for Peace in Bosnia.

33. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the contribution made by the Territorial Army Volunteer Reserve to UK peacekeeping operations overseas. [11768]

Dr. Reid: Over the last few years, our volunteer forces have made a significant contribution to peacekeeping operations overseas. The Territorial Army consistently supplies around 10 per cent. of British troops serving in the Former Yugoslavia; at present, some 400 TA soldiers are mobilised in the region.

Mission Statement

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he intends to publish his Department's mission statement. [14206]

Dr. Reid: I have nothing to add at this stage to the oral answer I gave to the hon. Member on 16 June, *Official Report*, columns 14–15.

Gulf War

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civilians were enlisted for the duration of the Gulf war. [13505]

Dr. Reid: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Navy Laundrymen

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Chinese nationals are currently serving as laundrymen on Her Majesty's ships; and by whom they are employed. [13508]

Dr. Reid: Employment of laundry personnel is primarily a matter for the contractor, Worldwide Laundry Services (WLS). However, I am advised that there are currently 38 Chinese Nationals serving on HM Ships. Of this number, 25 are employed by WLS and the remaining 13, working on ships not yet taken up by WLS, are employed by the following contractors: Mr. Chick Shun Chui; Mr. Kang Shik Ming BEM; Mr. K. P. Lau BEM; Shao Brothers and Mr. Sung Sun Ching. We would expect the rolling programme of ships transferring to the new contract arrangements to be completed by February 1998.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many ex-Gurkhas are currently serving as laundrymen on Her Majesty's ships; and by whom they are employed. [13506]

Dr. Reid: There are twenty eight ex-Gurkhas currently serving as laundrymen on HM Ships, employed by Worldwide Laundry Services (WLS).

Royal Fleet Auxiliary

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many non-UK nationals are currently employed aboard RFA ships. [13507]

Dr. Reid: There is a small number of non-UK nationals employed by the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. These are people who were employed before all RFA posts were designated Reserved posts and who retain reserved employment rights. I will write to the hon. Member with precise details and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Peacekeeping Operations

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the peacekeeping operations in which British forces have been involved since 1990, indicating the number of personnel of each of the armed services deployed in each, at three-monthly intervals over the last five years. [13159]

Dr. Reid: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Implementation Force Budget

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the marginal cost to his Department's budget of taking part in IFOR and Operation Decisive Edge in the financial year 1996–97; and how much was made available from the reserve towards these costs. [13133]

Dr. Reid: The additional cost to the Defence budget of the United Kingdom's military contribution to the NATO led Implementation Force (IFOR) was £183 million in 1996–97. The additional cost of the supporting air operation under Operation Decisive Edge was £19 million. Based on November 1996 forecasts of £184 million, the Government provided additional funding of £184 million to meet these costs.

Bosnia

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British troops are currently serving in Bosnia as part of the Stabilisation Force. [11851]

Dr. Reid: Some 5,300 UK troops are currently serving in the Former Yugoslavia as part of SFOR. Around 3,600 are based in Bosnia and a further 1,700 in Croatia. These figures exclude routine short term fluctuations in numbers as units arrive and depart from theatre.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the additional costs to his Department's budget of IFOR and Operation Decisive Edge; and how much additional funding was received from the reserve towards these costs. [14025]

Dr. Reid: Up to the end of the 1996–97 Financial Year, the additional cost to the Defence budget of the United Kingdom's military contribution to the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) was £243 million and £19 million for the supporting air operation under Operation Decisive Edge. Based on Number 1996 forecasts of £244 million, additional funding of £244 million was provided from the Reserve. The Ministry of Defence continues to incur follow on costs from the UK contribution to IFOR. Estimates of these costs are currently being updated and a statement will be made to the House in due course.

Ballistic Missile Defence

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has held with his NATO counterparts on ballistic missile defence. [11750]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend has had no discussions with his NATO counterparts on ballistics missile defence.

Departmental Overspend

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in respect of his Department's overspend in financial year 1996–97, how much he claimed from the Reserve in the first instance; and how much he finally obtained. [14024]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has not made a claim on the Reserve in the 1996–97 financial year which ended before the present Government was elected.

In November 1996, the former Secretary of State sought and secured funding from the Reserve to meet the estimated additional costs of the United Kingdom's contribution to the NATO-led Implementation Force in the Former Yugoslavia in 1996–97 of £184 million; £160 million for ground operations and £24 million for supporting air operations. In the event, the actual cost of the ground operation in 1996–97 was £183 million and a further £22 million was incurred in meeting the United Kingdom's commitment to the follow on Stabilisation Force on which decisions were made after the Reserve claim.

SOCIAL SECURITY

War Pensions

Mr Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which local authorities do not exercise their discretion to disregard war widows' pensions and war pensions when assessing entitlement to housing benefit and council tax rebate. [13941]

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate the cost of a uniform disregard of war and war widows pensions by all local authorities when assessing entitlement to housing benefit or council tax rebates; and if she will give the figures separately for each of the authorities who currently give no disregard or only a partial disregard. [13166]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The cost to local authorities (LA) in England, Scotland and Wales if all LAs fully disregarded war and war widow's pensions when calculating entitlement to housing benefit and council tax benefit is estimated to be £70 million. This is in addition to the cost to central Government of £15 million for the statutory disregards in these benefits.

Information on discretionary local schemes for housing and council tax benefits is not routinely collected. This is because any such scheme must be funded from an authority's own resources and, therefore, the decision to operate a scheme is entirely for individual LAs.

Reduced Benefit Directions

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many parents with care on *(a)* income support, *(b)* family credit and *(c)* disability working allowance are currently subject to a reduced benefit direction at (i) the rate of reduction which applied before November 1996 and (ii) the 40 per cent. rate of reduction applying after November 1996. [14160]

Mr. Keith Bradley: All children have the right to the support of both their parents wherever they may live.

Before 7 October 1996, parents with care in receipt of a relevant benefit who failed to co-operate with the Child Support Agency without good cause were subject to a benefit reduction of 20 per cent. of the adult income support personal allowance for six months followed by a further reduction of 10 per cent. for 12 months. From 7 October 1996, the reduction was increased to 40 per cent. of the adult income support personal allowance for three years to be immediately renewed if the parent with care continued to fail to co-operate.

The latest available information is from February 1997, which shows that 3,000 parents with care on income support were subject to a 20 per cent. reduction; 7,000 were subject to a 10 per cent. benefit reduction; and 4,000 were subject to a 40 per cent. reduction.

Figures for parents with care in receipt of family credit or disability working allowance who are subject to a benefit reduction are not available.

Extra-Statutory Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the cost of extra-statutory payments by the Benefits Agency in each month since January 1995. [14015]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Details of the monthly expenditure on extra-statutory payments by the Benefits Agency are only held from the commencement of the 1995–96 year. Although individual monthly figures are not available for the period 1 January 1995 to 31 March 1995 the annual amount paid has been included in the table.

£

Month	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
April	—	99,077	122,914	147,127
May	—	43,653	105,639	78,014
June	—	107,177	108,344	213,604
July	—	102,524	93,091	85,446
August	—	214,774	34,712	128,483
September	—	145,624	123,952	161,525
October	—	165,141	130,223	—
November	—	153,595	84,487	—
December	—	153,578	35,953	—
January	—	139,551	87,633	—
February	—	93,182	91,286	—
March	—	79,263	101,250	—
Totals	955,329	1,497,139	1,119,484	814,199
Special exercise	—	—	[1]2,650,063	—
Grand totals	955,329	1,497,139	3,769,547	814,199

[1] Payments made to the Dorset Trust Housing Association due to loss of benefit following incorrect advice given by the Benefits Agency.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she expects to resume social security payments to appellant asylum seekers. [13492]

Mr. Keith Bradley: An inter-departmental review led by the Home Office is currently considering all aspects of arrangements for asylum seekers, including the provision of accommodation and support throughout the entire asylum process.

Benefit Backdating

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the annual savings from the proposed limitation of backdating of benefit claims to one month; and if she will break this total down by client group. [14020]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is in the table.

£ million cash

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Elderly	0	10	14	14
Long-term sick and disabled	0	14	18	18
Lone parents	0	8	10	10
Unemployed	0	10	16	16
Others	0	0	0	0
Total	0	42	58	58

1. The estimated savings relate to the proposed measure in the Social Security Bill to reduce the maximum amount of backdating of benefit claims from three months to one month.

2. Estimates are based on an ad hoc survey of backdated benefit claims undertaken during 1996 uprated in line with Departmental forecasts of benefit expenditure. The savings are in addition to those estimated for the April 1997 changes which reduced the maximum amount of backdating of benefit claims to three months and benefit reviews to one month.

3. Allocation of benefit savings to client groups is in accordance with the convention used in tables 4 and 5 of the 1997 Departmental Report. Income support, housing benefit and council tax benefit savings are divided between the expected beneficiaries.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the expected annual savings from the limitation of backdating of benefit claims to three months; and if she will break this total down by client group. [14021]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is in the table.

£ million cash

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Elderly	36	48	63	63
Long-term sick and disabled	33	49	49	49
Lone parents	18	20	20	20
Unemployed	3	3	3	3
Total	90	120	135	135

1. The estimated savings relate to the April 1997 changes which reduced the maximum amount of backdating of benefit claims to three months and benefit reviews to one month.

2. Based on an ad hoc survey of backdated benefit claims undertaken during 1996, uprated in line with Departmental forecasts of benefit expenditure.

3. Allocation of benefit savings to client groups is in accordance with the convention used in Tables 4 and 5 of the 1997 Departmental Report. Income support savings are divided between the expected beneficiaries.

Lone Parents

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the percentage of a random sample of lone parents whose youngest child was at school and who were receiving income support who would typically flow off benefit in a three-month period in current economic circumstances. [14023]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

There were 506,000 income support claimants with a lone parent premium at the end of November 1996 whose youngest child was aged five or over. Around 46,000 of these had ceased to claim by the end of February 1997. Some of those whose claim terminated during this period may have reclaimed by February 1997.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, November 1996 and February 1997.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much of the funds committed under the new deal for lone parents in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* future years comes from (i) the windfall tax, (ii) savings made from the freezing and re-structuring of the lone parent premium and one parent benefit, (iii) savings from the further reductions planned to the family premium (lone parent rate) and child benefit (lone parent rate) and (iv) the abolition of the child benefit increase for new lone parent claimants in 1998. [14166]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is as follows. The funding for the New Deal for Lone Parents up until October 1998 will be met from within existing provision. The funding for future years will be met entirely from the windfall levy. This will comprise of £150 million over the life of the Parliament plus an additional £50 million to improve financial help with the cost of childcare in the In-Work benefits.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents on income support are estimated to have a child under five years and three months old who has not yet reached their second term at school in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99. [14163]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows. Each school and local education authority has its own policy on the point in the school year at which children in their fifth year start school, and no central figures are available on the actual age (by year and month) at which children start. The number of lone parents on income support whose youngest child was aged five years and three months or less at February 1997 was 538,000.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, February 1997. Sample size 5 per cent. Lone parents are defined as those receiving the Income Support Lone Parent premium.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what will be the future entitlement to one-parent benefit of lone parents currently receiving income support and who flow off income support after 31 October. [14019]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The proposed changes to Child Benefit for new lone parents are due to be implemented from June 1998, prior to that date current entitlement rules still apply. From implementation of the proposed changes, new lone parents will receive the same rate of Child Benefit as couples with children. Existing recipients will not be affected as long as they continue to satisfy entitlement conditions. In addition, lone parents who are receiving Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance with the lone parent rate of family premium will be able to make one subsequent claim for the lone parent rate of Child Benefit when they move into work.

Mr. Rendal: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what was the annual cost of the lone parent premium and one parent benefit in *(a)* 1994–95, *(b)* 1995–96 and *(c)* 1996–97; [14161]

(2) what are the projected annual costs to the Government of the family premium (lone parent rate) and child benefit (lone parent rate) in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99. [14162]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables. Information on expenditure on the lone parent premium is not available as components of a benefit award cannot be separately identified. The lone parent premium is payable with Income Support, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Benefit expenditure on one parent benefit/child benefit (Lone parent payment)

£ million

1994–95	289
1995–96	310
1996–97	348
1997–98	330
1998–99	313

1. Total expenditure figures are consistent with the 1997 Departmental Report.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest £ million.

Estimated expenditure on lone parent premium/family premium (Lone parent)

£ million

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Income support	276	285	286	275	220
Housing benefit	63	75	85	100	95
Council tax benefit	57	68	74	80	85

1. From April 1997, the lone parent premium payable with the income related benefits was amalgamated with the family premium to become the family premium (lone parent rate).
2. The estimates of expenditure for 1997–98 and 1998–99 show the extra cost of paying a higher rate of family premium to lone parents.
3. The expenditure in Great Britain is obtained by multiplying the number of recipients by the value of the premium. However, some recipients will receive an overall amount of benefit which is less than the value of the premium.
4. Lone parents claiming the income related benefits after April 1998 will no longer be entitled to the higher rate of the family premium. The effects of this change are included in the reported estimates.
5. Estimates for 1994–95 to 1996–97 are based on sample data and are not entirely consistent with Departmental Report figures.
6. Estimates for 1997–98 to 1998–99 are consistent with the overall expenditure estimates in the 1997 Departmental Report.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the annual savings from *(a)* the removal for new claimants of the family premium (lone parent rate) in April 1998 and *(b)* the planned abolition for new claimants of the lone parent increase of child benefit under the Social Security Bill 1997. [14168]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The estimated net saving from the removal of entitlement, for new cases, to the lone parent rates of *(a)* family premium, in income support,

jobseeker's allowance, housing and council tax benefit is, in the three years starting from 1998–99, £55 million, £125 million and £170 million. *(b)* child benefit is, in the three years starting from 1998–99, £5 million, £15 million and £25 million.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much the Government have saved to date from *(a)* the freezing and re-structuring of the lone parent premium and *(b)* the freezing and re-structuring of the lone-parent increase of child benefit. [14167]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is in the table.

1996–97 savings realised from

	£ million
Income support/jobseeker's allowance	
lone parent premium	10
One parent premium	5

1. The latest available estimates are for the financial year 1996–97.

2. The first year savings were realised from the freezing of the lone parent premium and one parent benefit.

3. Estimates rounded to nearest £5 million.

4. Information is not yet available for recipients of the housing benefit/council tax benefit lone parent premium in 1996–97.

Source:

1. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries.

2. Child Benefit Management Information System Data.

Pensions Policy Review

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what meetings have been held with pensioners' organisations concerning the review of pensions policy; and if he will make a statement. [13666]

Mr. Denham: On 17 July my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State, announced a wide-ranging review of the central areas of insecurity for elderly people, including all aspects of the basic pension and second pensions, including SERPS.

The first stage of the review has involved an extensive public consultation exercise with pensioners' organisations, employers, employees, consumer groups, the pensions industry and others. As part of that exercise I have met the following organisations: Security in Retirement, including Baroness Castle, Mr. Barry Fawcett of the Public Service Pensioners' Council, National Association of Retired Police Officers, the British Pensioners and Trade Union Association, Help the Aged and Age Concern. I have also met the National Pensioners' Convention on 3 occasions reflecting their central and specific role to ensure that the views of today's pensioners are at the heart of the review process. Departmental Officials have also held a separate meeting with them.

We have already received more than 1,100 written responses to the review, including representations from pensioner organisations, which we will consider. The Government intends to publish its initial framework for change in the first part of 1998. There will then be a further period of consultation before firm proposals are developed.

Decision Making and Appeals (Consultation)

Mr Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she plans to make available to the general public the results of the consultation on improving decision making and appeals in social security. [14017]

Mr. Keith Bradley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) on 23 June, *Official Report*, column *418*. Members of the public can obtain copies from the Decision Making and Appeals Branch, Department of Social Security, The Adelphi, 1–11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 4 November 1997

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Labour

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress at the Oslo Conference on preventing the exploitation of child labour in third world and developing countries. [13359]

Clare Short: The Conference was organised by the Norwegian Government with the joint support of the ILO and UNICEF. Building on an earlier conference in Amsterdam, as well as three subsequent regional conferences in Asia, Africa and Latin America, its purpose was to achieve agreement on an Agenda for Action, to be taken forward by governments—41 were represented, the majority from developing countries; representatives of multilateral organisations, trades unions, employers associations and NGOs were also represented at the conference.

The Conference was a success. It produced a sensible and balanced agenda for action; it provided the opportunity for the different constituents to understand each other's viewpoints and agree more collaborative ways of working together. While some further work will be required to achieve agreement next year on the new ILO Convention on Intolerable Child Labour, the Oslo Conference will have strengthened in-country and international partnerships for tackling the problem on the ground.

The Conference was largely devoted to working sessions on the themes of legislation, education and social mobilisation. Views on priorities and sequencing between these themes depended largely on each participant's constituency and country of origin. Cutting across each working group was a discussion of how to take measures to end child labour while protecting the livelihoods of working children and their families.

In my statement to the Conference I said that the industrialised world should re-read its own history concerning our own past exploitation of children and then approach this subject with due humility. But our own history reminds us how destructive child labour can be. It stunts childhood and damages health, and the deprivation of education it entails sentences the child concerned to a lifetime of poverty. At the same time, child labour undermines the wages of adults and entrenches families in poverty. If the poor countries are to develop, they must ensure that the children are in school and their parents at work.

I mentioned the great public concern in the UK about child labour. UK consumers are increasingly supporting ethical movements and are not prepared to buy goods produced by exploiting children. But we have learnt that boycotts or over-night exclusion of children from industries can drive the children into worse exploitation. So we must devise strategies that benefit the children and their families. Football stitching is not the most intolerable type of work for children in Pakistan, but it is one which drew international attention. We have to start work where we can. I therefore announced our intention to fund Save the Children to implement a social protection programme in Sialkot so that when, at the end of next year, children stop working in the football stitching industry, they are not forced into more hazardous and exploitative work. We intend that the model developed in Sialkot will then be adapted and applied in another province, focusing on removing and protecting children from more intolerable forms of work which are less susceptible to pressure form international consumers.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if she will make a statement. [13627]

Clare Short: Because of the extent of public interest in the issue, DFID's costed action plans, along with that of other government departments, will be reported first to Parliament after analysis by the Central Information Technology Unit (Cabinet Office) and Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency to which DFID's plans were notified in October 1997. They will be available thereafter.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if she will make a statement. [13630]

Clare Short: An audit of DFID's systems was completed in June 1997 and identified a small number of departmental systems that were not millennium compliant in addition to those corporate systems that had already been identified.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in her Department and its associated public bodies. [13631]

Clare Short: As Secretary of State I have overall responsibility. The responsible official within the Department is Mr. A. Davis, Head of the Information Systems Department.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if she expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13629]

Clare Short: For 1997–98 we have made provision for £145,000 consisting of £100,000 for purchasing assistance and £45,000 of departmental staff's time working on year 2000 issues. For 1998–99 provision of £65,000 has been made to cover departmental staff time testing changes. The budgets are adequate unless there are unforseen difficulties.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which she is responsible; if she will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if she will make a statement. [13628]

Clare Short: The figures of expenditure to date are not available for the corporate systems already made millennium compliant. This is because they were being transferred to a new system for resource accounting and no separate costs for staff input were kept. An estimated £10,000 of staff time establishing inventory, planning and reporting on other systems has been incurred to date.

Ethiopia

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the effect of the lack of rule of law in southern Ethiopia on the delivery of United Kingdom supported aid programmes to that country. [13750]

Clare Short: There has been no disruption to UK supported aid programmes in southern Ethiopia arising from legal or security problems in that region.

Banana Imports

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the World Trade Organisation's ruling on Caribbean banana imports to the EU and its impact on overseas aid to the Caribbean. [14048]

Clare Short: The EU bananas regime represents a serious attempt to meet our obligations to our trading partners and developing countries. We are obviously disappointed that parts of it have been found incompatible with the WTO, but accept that the Community must now set about revising the EU arrangements to bring them into conformity with the WTO's rules.

The Government is considering the WTO findings on the EU banana regime in liaison with the Commission in Brussels, which have the principal responsibility for proposing a new WTO compatible regime. We intend to play a major role as leading advocates of the legitimate interests of those developing countries in the Caribbean which have traditionally supplied the UK market. They can rest assured that we have their interest high on our agenda.

The Windward Islands, already have large allocations of aid from the European Union under the Stabex facility. These are being deployed to strengthen the competitiveness of the banana industry, assist economic diversification and develop social safety nets. The case for additional finance from the European Union will be examined as the implications of the WTO findings become clearer.

Papua New Guinea

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development, pursuant to his Department's letter to the hon. Member for Linlithgow on the peoples of the New Guinea highlands, what measures he is taking to help the victims of drought in Papua New Guinea. [14414]

Clare Short: As stated in the letter of 20 October to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, we have already provided £50,000 for the purchase of food, medicines and water containers. We are now considering the 28 October appeal from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and are expecting proposals from CAFOD and World Vision.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Market Testing

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on the 12 guiding principles for using market testing and contracting out. [14544]

Dr. David Clark: Following consultation with the Council of Civil Service Unions and the CBI, I have published "12 Guiding Principles in Using Market Testing and Contracting Out" for central Government Departments, including their agencies. I am grateful for the assistance of the Council of Civil Service Unions and the CBI. Wherever possible I have incorporated their suggestions.

The "12 Guiding Principles" have been very well received. They will also apply to private finance initiative projects that involve staff transfers.

The Government's "12 Guiding Principles" are as follows.

1. Our aim is to develop modernised, high quality, efficient, responsive, customer-focused central Government services. Our approach to this is pragmatic not dogmatic.
2. We will work in partnership with the private sector, extending the circle of those involved in public service.
3. We will use market testing and contracting out when in individual cases these can be shown to offer better value for money, that is: better quality services at optimal cost. Our approach to this is pragmatic not dogmatic.
4. Existing plans for market tests and contracting out, therefore, should proceed, unless the Minister is satisfied that in the circumstances of an individual case, better value for money can be achieved by other means, which will enable a Department to live within its running costs ceilings. This judgment should be based on a robust and objective comparison of the particular market test or contracting out exercise and the alternative means available.
5. Ministers remain accountable for services contracted out to the private sector. (That is the Carltona principle is replicated).
6. The energy, skill and commitment of staff are our best assets in modernising public services. They should be properly trained to carry out market testing, contracting out, benchmarking, restructuring and other means for achieving better value for money that is: better quality services at optimal cost.

7. The concerns of those affected by change should be fully taken into account and properly addressed.

8. Where the relevant circumstances apply when work transfers, staff will be protected by the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) and the consultation and information requirements of those regulations should be followed scrupulously. To avoid a successful claim for constructive unfair dismissal when staff transfer from Crown employment in circumstances to which TUPE applies, Departments should ensure that the new employers offer broadly comparable occupational pension provision or suitable compensation.

9. Full, effective and continuous communication is a key to successful improvement and change. It should begin as soon as a review which might lead to change is mooted and it should continue afterwards to share what has been achieved. It should happen even when there may be little to report. That way, staff, and their recognised trade union representatives, can be engaged throughout and rumours can be avoided.

10. There should also be full and open information and communication with Departments' customers and stakeholders.

11. Relations with the private sector need to rest on two-way openness and trust. Until the Government's new arrangements on freedom of information are in place, Departments should apply a liberal interpretation to the existing "Code of Practice on Access to Government Information" and its "Guidance on Interpretation." Unsuccessful bidders need to know why they were unsuccessful and how they could succeed next time. For the public, it is important to know how much central Government services cost, no matter who provides them. Commercial confidentiality must not be used as a cloak to deny the public's right to know.

12. Senior management in Departments must give leadership in all these areas and should encourage innovation and continuous improvement.

The guidance on market testing and contracting out, by central Government departments, is being up-dated to reflect these 12 guiding principles. The Council of Civil Service Unions and the CBI are being involved in this work.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1) what is his estimate of the total cost of the United Kingdom public sector of resolving the computer millennium problem; and if he will make a statement; [13229]

(2) what assessment he has made of the progress being made by departments towards computer millennium compliance; if he expects all departments and public bodies to have achieved complete computer millennium compliance prior to 1 January 2000; and if he will make a statement. [13231]

Dr. David Clark: I have asked Government Departments to provide me with detailed and costed plans for dealing with the year 2000 date change problem as soon as possible after 1 October 1997.

I am awaiting an analysis and report on these plans from the Central Information Technology Unit and the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency so that I can form an overall picture of progress, costs and future plans. Once I have done so I will inform Parliament.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list those Departments and agencies which did not respond to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency questionnaire regarding progress towards millennium computer compliance, sent out in December 1996 to January 1997. [13230]

Dr. David Clark: In December 1996 and January 1997, the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency issued a year 2000 questionnaire to a sample of 133 central government departments, executive agencies and other public sector organisations. The majority of large departments and agencies responded to this questionnaire. Departments and agencies which did not respond are listed in the table. Most of these have responded to a follow-up survey carried out in the summer. All departments and agencies are required to complete a full and detailed costed action plan as soon as possible after 1 October 1997.

Export Credits Guarantee Department;

General Register Office for Scotland;

Intervention Board;

Legal Aid Board;

Lord Chancellor's Department;

Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department;

Serious Fraud Office;

The Royal Parks;

UK Passport Agency.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13632]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The action plans for resolving the computer millennium problem in the Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service, its agencies and associated public bodies are complete. These plans will be published by my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, when he has completed his analysis of the situation across Government as a whole.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if he will make a statement. [13633]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Estimates of the total cost of addressing the computer millennium problem within the Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service, its Agencies and associated public bodies are:

	To date	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999-00*
(a) Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service	minimal	£27,600	minimal	minimal
(b) Office of Public Service Agencies	£61,128	£50,520	£136,457	£99,350
(c) Other public bodies	nil	nil	nil	nil

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13635]

Mr. Kilfoyle: In the Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service, its Agencies and associated public bodies for which I am responsible, millennium computer compliance systems audits were completed between 1994 and September 1997.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13634]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The expenditure required to address the computer millennium problem will be met from within existing planned expenditure totals.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13636]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Within the Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service, its agencies and associated public bodies, ministerial responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance rests with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The Cabinet Office civil servant with responsibility for this work is the head of infrastructure. Responsibilities within the agencies are as follows:

	Responsibility
Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency	Year 2000 Programme Manager
The Buying Agency	Director of Finance and IT
Property Advisers to the Civil Estate	Director of Corporate Services
Security Facilities Executive	Director of Finance and IT
Civil Service College	Head of IS Services
Government Car and Despatch Agency	Director of Finance
Central Office of Information	Principal Establishment and Finance Officer

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Protection from Harassment Act 1997

Mr. Beith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he intends to implement sections 3(2) to 3(9) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997. [13005]

Mr. Hoon: Subsections 3(3) to 3(9) of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 introduce, among other things, a system whereby the breach of an injunction granted by a civil court may be dealt with as a criminal offence. Rules and forms have been drafted for use by the High Court, county courts, the crown court and magistrates courts to ensure that the process works effectively. Consultation on these is under way, and as soon as it is complete the outstanding subsections will be commenced.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13958]

Mr. Hoon: For letters received since 1 May 1997 the average time is approximately 23 days, including weekends and bank holidays.

Access to Neighbouring Land Act

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to extend the provisions of the Access to Neighbouring Land Act 1992 to Northern Ireland. [11995]

Mr. Hoon: There are no such proposals. The differences between the land laws of Northern Ireland and of England and Wales make such an extension impossible.

TREASURY

Euro Symbol

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what research his Department has undertaken into the ease with which the euro currency symbol will be distinguishable from that for sterling. [12534]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* The Royal Mint and Bank of England have been closely involved in preparatory work with other member states and national central banks on the design and specifications of euro coins and banknotes. On the basis of the provisional specifications for euro coins and the specifications for banknotes agreed in the European Monetary Institute they will be easily distinguishable from sterling coins and banknotes.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the suppliers to his Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13551]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* At 29 October, there were 24 invoices outstanding with a value of £9,002. This represents 2.4 per cent. of invoices paid in a typical month. The value represents less than 1 per cent. of the typical average value of invoices paid per month.

The following table lists the 24 payments that are due to suppliers on 29 October, that will be paid more than 30 days after the receipt of the invoice and which are not in dispute.

Supplier	Number of invoices	Amounts due (£)	Due date
Ariane Languages	2	506	11 October 1997
Avis Rent a Car Ltd.	1	345	19 October 1997
Business Systems Group	1	100	17 October 1997
Corporate Express	3	802	2 October 1997
Corporate Express	2	3,072	26 October 1997
GBM Services	1	243	9 October 1997
Mitie Maintenance	1	1,079	2 October 1997
OHSA Ltd.	1	80	17 October 1997
Spectrum Computer Supp.	1	144	24 October 1997
Spectrum Computer Supp.	2	9	29 October 1997
Sykes and Son Ltd.	1	760	12 September 1997
Terminix Peter Cox Ltd.	2	197	13 September 1997
The Green Alliance	1	55	24 October 1997
The Royal York Hotel	1	70	26 October 1997
The Stationery Office	1	644	21 September 1997
Tigemeyer	1	244	9 October 1997
Vodaphone Corporate Ltd.	1	37	12 October 1997
University of Durham	1	615	15 October 1997
Total	24	9,002	

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will state the amount allocated in each budget of the European Community for information relating to implementation of EMU; on what occasions such expenditure was authorised by the Economic and Finance Council; and what *(a)* observations and *(b)* votes were made by Ministers on each occasion. [12965]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* Funding for information relating to the implementation of EMU has been made available since 1996 under the European Commission's information programme for European citizens (Prince). The relevant budget line is B3306.

The EC Budget does not break down the overall level of Prince by individual programme. I would suggest that the hon. Member approaches the European Commission directly for this information.

The Budget Council have so far considered the budget allocation for Prince on four occasions—during their second reading of the 1996 budget on 17 November 1995, their first and second readings of the 1997 budget on 25 July 1996 and 19 November 1996, and their first reading of the 1998 budget on 24 July 1997.

On each occasion the Budget Council, supported by the UK, have reduced the budget allocation for Prince. However, since this spending is not obligatory under the treaty it has been the European Parliament that has in each case set the final level in the budget.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer to what extent Government investment in *(a)* additional building for maintained schools, *(b)* the national health service, *(c)* London Underground and *(d)* new roads counts within the totals of Government revenue, expenditure and borrowing used for the European monetary union convergence criteria. [12944]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* All current and capital expenditure by central and local government contributes to the general government financial deficit (GGFD), the Maastricht measure of the budget deficit. This includes all government grants to maintained schools and London Underground, and all Government spending on the national health service and new roads.

Government lending and government transactions in shares are not included in the GGFD. For example, government lending to London Underground, NHS trust hospitals and students does not increase GGFD. However, the government has to finance such lending through higher taxes or increased borrowing. Increased borrowing would add to general government gross debt—the Maastricht measure of Government debt.

Similarly, receipts from repayments of government lending, and from privatisation proceeds, do not reduce the GGFD but would reduce gross debt.

Taxation (EU)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to preserve the protection of the British veto on tax matters in the European Union. [12843]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government has made it clear that EU tax matters will continue to be subject to unanimous agreement.

Savings

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what tax regime and investment allowances he proposes to apply to individual savings accounts; and if he will make a statement; [13031]

(2) if he plans to allow existing personal equity plans and tax-exempt special savings accounts account holders to retain their current tax incentives and annual investment allowances, under these schemes, following the introduction of the individual savings account in 1999; [13033]

(3) what estimate he has made of the annual cost or benefit to the Exchequer of introducing the individual savings account; [13039]

(4) if the introduction of the individual savings account will alter the contractual obligations between savers and saving institutions; and if he will make a statement. [13032]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Consideration is currently being given, with interested parties, to the scope of tax-privileged savings from 1999. The matters referred to will be covered in a consultative document to be published later this year.

Insurance Premium Tax

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many representations his Department has received on insurance premium tax for the travel industry. [13123]

Dawn Primarolo: I have received a number of representations on this subject.

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's review of insurance premium tax; and what is the timetable for the review. [13122]

Dawn Primarolo: I have asked officials in Customs and Excise to monitor the effect of the introduction of the higher rate of insurance premium tax and this will include the impact of the differential tax treatment on travel agents. It is too early yet to draw any firm conclusions from this process and I anticipate that the monitoring will continue for some time. The issue of the application of the higher rate to travel insurance sold by travel agents will also be the subject of a judicial review hearing on 4 November. The conclusions of that hearing will clearly need to be taken into account when considering whether changes are necessary to this measure.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his Department's review of the impact of different rates of insurance premium tax as between travel agents and brokers. [14006]

Dawn Primarolo: I have asked officials in Customs and Excise to monitor the effect of the introduction of the higher rate of insurance premium tax and this will include the impact of the differential tax treatment on travel agents. It is too early yet to draw any firm conclusions from this process.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with banks on the need for their computer systems to be millennium compliant. [13157]

Mrs. Liddell: This subject has been raised in Treasury discussions with the British Bankers Association, which has issued guidance and a timetable to the industry. The Bank of England has been talking to banks about their implementation of the timetable.

Trade Statistics

Dr. Fox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* proportion and *(b)* value of Britain's trade was conducted in (i) German marks, (ii) United States dollars and (iii) other European currencies in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [13764]

Mrs. Liddell: The following two tables show the most recent official data on currency of invoice other than sterling, relating to 1984–1988. The data requested are only available for US dollars. Data for individual European currencies other than sterling are not available, although a special exercise to determine Deutschmark usage suggested that, in 1987 and 1988, this was 4 per cent. for exports and 14 per cent. for imports.

Percentage of UK trade denominated in dollars and currency of partner country

Year	Denominated in dollars		Denominated in currencies of partner countries	
	Exports[2]	Imports[3]	Exports	Imports
1984	15	25	22	41
1985	18	24	23	43
1986	20	17	26	46
1987	19	13	24	46
1988	15	16	24	41

[1]Including US for US/UK trade.
[2]Export data based on November transactions except for 1987 which is based on May data.
[3]Import data based on September transactions, except for 1987 which is based on March data.

Value of UK trade denominated in dollars and currency of partner country

£ million

Year	Denominated in dollars		Denominated in currencies of partner countries[1]	
	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports
1984	13,745	24,440	20,159	40,083
1985	18,367	23,757	23,469	42,565
1986	19,577	17,207	25,450	46,562
1987	20,215	14,526	25,535	51,399
1988	16,091	19,967	25,745	51,166

Source:
"British Business" 17 January 1986 and 24 April 1987 (DTI) and "Business Bulletin"
15 December 1989 (CSO).

Note:
[1] Including US for US/UK trade.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* proportion and *(b)* value of Britain's trade was denominated in sterling in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [13763]

Mrs. Liddell: The following table shows the most recent official data on currency of invoice, relating to 1984–1988.

Proportion and value of UK trade denominated in sterling (1984–1988)

Year	Proportion of trade (per cent.)		Value of trade (£million)	
	Exports[1]	Imports[2]	Exports	Imports
1984	63	34	57,728	33,239
1985	59	32	60,204	31,676
1986	54	37	52,858	37,452
1987	57	40	60,646	44,695
1988	62	43	66,509	53,662

Source:
"British Business" 17 January 1996 and 17 April 1987 (DTI) and "Business Bulletin" 15 December 1989 (CSO).

Notes:
[1] Export data based on November transactions, except for 1987 which is based on May data.
[2] Import data based on September transactions, except for 1987 which is based on March data.

Elderly People (Winter Mortality)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were the excess winter mortality deaths for elderly people in the winter of 1996–97. [14208]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Chris Ruane, dated 4 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to your recent question on the number of excess winter deaths among the elderly in the winter of 1996–97.

Based on the latest available data, there were an estimated 37,800 excess winter deaths among people aged 75 years and over, and 44,800 excess deaths among people aged 65 years and over, in England and Wales during the winter of 1996–97.

Excess winter deaths are defined as the number of deaths in the four months from December to March less the average of the numbers during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

EC Spending

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Government intends to pursue the four challenges made by the United Kingdom in the European Court of Justice to spending without a legal base by the European Commission. [14576]

Mrs Liddell: The Government has decided to continue with the four cases currently before the European Court of Justice. These cover expenditure on social exclusion projects, for both the 1995 and 1996 budget years; and, for the 1996 budget year, measures in favour of older people and the "pilot action" for a European Voluntary Service.

I should like to make it clear that in choosing to retain these challenges the Government is seeking to uphold an important matter of budgetary principle. We believe that it is essential for the proper and effective control of public expenditure that the European Commission should be bound by the same rules of propriety that apply elsewhere in the EU.

At the same time, I am anxious to stress that this decision in no way reflects our views on the policy content of the challenged measures nor calls into question the Government's commitment to Community action in the social field where this is agreed by the Council. Our support for the new treaty provisions agreed at Amsterdam, which allow the Council to adopt small spending programmes on employment and social exclusion by QMV, is evidence of this.

Private Finance Initiative

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the latest list of signed PFI projects. [14578]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: Yes, I have done so today.

International Meetings

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the international meetings he attended in September. [14577]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I attended the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in Mauritius on the 15–17 September. I then attended the first meeting of Asian and European Finance Ministers on 19 September in Bangkok. This was followed by a series of meetings in Hong Kong. The G7 was held on 20 September with the G10 Finance Ministers and central bank governors meeting on 21 September. The IMF's interim committee meeting was also held on 21 September, and was followed by the IMF/World Bank annual meeting on 23 September. I also attended the IMF/World Bank Development Committee with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development on 22 September.

My over-arching priorities for these meetings were the reduction of developing country debt and the promotion of the benefits of openness and transparency in economic policy.

I announced the UK's "Debt 2000" initiative at the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting. This initiative, which has now been dubbed the "Mauritius mandate", is designed to resolve the debt problems of poor countries once and for all and set them on a path to sustainable growth. It proposes that every poor country eligible for debt relief should have at least embarked on the process of securing the full relief they need by the year 2000. This will contribute to the international target of halving the proportion of the world's population living in absolute poverty by 2015.

I stressed that the success of this mandate depends not only on the commitment of the creditor countries but also on solid action by the debtors. Debtor countries must adopt and maintain sound economic policies which are necessary for sustainable economic development. Each country is unique and no one policy will be right for every country. But accountable economic decision-making and a focus on productive expenditure, including basic health and education, will be vital aspects of their economic programmes. My right hon. Friend, the Minister for International Development announced that the UK is willing to cancel the remaining aid debt due to the UK from poorer Commonwealth countries. These countries could be relieved of the need to repay as much as £132 million.

I encourage other creditors to provide the maximum possible relief to ensure a robust exit from unsustainable debt to those countries who focus on transparency and productive expenditure. I expressed my desire for these countries to receive the necessary debt relief in less than the maximum six years that is presently envisaged under the rules of the initiative. The Mauritius mandate was well received and was supported by other Commonwealth Ministers.

I also launched a new initiative on openness in economic decision making at the interim committee. My central proposal was that the IMF should develop a code of good practice for promoting openness in fiscal and monetary policy. I believe that this should focus on basic principles that apply to all IMF members. As such, I

proposed that the IMF should, as a matter of course, comment on such practices in their IV consultations with all member countries. I also suggested that this code could be used operationally in the design of IMF programmes for financial assistance. These proposals attracted considerable interest and the fund is now developing such a code on the fiscal side.

I stressed that long-term stability in monetary and fiscal policy is necessary to achieve sustainable growth. But, the role of government must also be to equip individuals and companies to succeed in the ever more competitive global market-place. Part of this entails ensuring that policies which provide economic stability are combined with institutions and procedures which create the confidence that stability will be maintained. It was agreed that greater openness and transparency would enhance policy credibility and limit the potential for corruption.

In keeping with this, I announced that the UK would publish a full set of annual accounts and a quarterly report on the region exchange reserves detailing the UK's outstanding forward position.

Another key feature of the discussions at these meetings was capital flows. It was agreed that private capital flows can bring substantial benefits and as such, the report of the Commonwealth working group on private capital flows was endorsed by the Ministers. The importance of sound macroeconomic policies and financial systems, strong regulatory and supervisory frameworks and political stability were recognised as essential for encouraging inward investment.

There was general agreement that the international financial institutions also have a key role to play in putting in place multilateral arrangements and mechanisms for promoting and coping with private capital flows. More specifically for the Commonwealth, Ministers agreed on the key elements of a code of good practice for national policies that attract and sustain private capital flows. The secretariat was asked to develop these elements into a full code as soon as possible.

The interim committee adopted the statement on "The Liberalisation of Capital Movements Under an Amendment of the Fund's Articles" and considered that an amendment of the fund's articles will provide the most effective means of promoting an orderly liberalisation of capital movements consistent with the fund's role in the international monetary system. The proposed amendment to the articles will also ensure that liberalisation can be phased in at a country's chosen pace and that controls can be reintroduced on a temporary basis.

The first ever meeting of Asian and European Finance Ministers represented an important addition to the Asia-Europe Meetings (or ASEM) process which began only last year, and reflected the growing co-operation between two regions whose economic and financial interests are rapidly converging.

The meeting began with an exchange of views on the macroeconomic outlook and developments in foreign exchange markets. I offered my full support to the programmes of adjustment which Thailand and the Philippines have agreed with the IMF, and stressed how crucial it would be to adhere to these programmes. Asian partners were keen to learn more about the implications of EMU, and we agreed that every opportunity would be taken to keep them fully informed on latest developments.

In the second session on financial sector issues, I stressed the need for close co-operation, and the importance for both Asia and Europe of sharing and learning from each other—especially through a greater openness, in the trade in financial services and a welcoming attitude to foreign capital. We agreed a number of useful initiatives, including closer co-operation on financial supervision and the fight against money laundering.

The Government places great importance on the ASEM process, and the Prime Minister very much looks forward to welcoming Asian and European Heads to London next April as host of the second ASEM summit. The G7 meeting considered recent developments in south-east Asia in the context of surveillance. We were informed of international efforts to assist Thailand and expected the Thai authorities not only to implement the Fund program but also to continue to co-operate with the other international financial institutions. We agreed on the importance of minimising contagion and will continue to monitor closely developments in south-east Asia. In accordance with this, the importance of increased transparency within and supervision of financial systems was stressed. We also discussed recent developments in exchange and financial markets and agreed to monitor developments in these markets and cooperate as necessary.

My colleagues were interested in the plans that we have for our presidency of the G7 and G8 next year. I informed them that employability will be one of the main themes of the UK presidency.

The G10 meeting welcomed the broad endorsement given to the concerted strategy to promote financial stability in emerging market economies that has been developed in collaboration with representatives of these economies. The finalisation of the Basle core principles of effective banking supervision was welcomed and the importance of their endorsement and implementation by national authorities was stressed.

I was nominated as Chairman of the Group of Ten for the coming year. At the interim committee, I welcomed the agreements in the executive board on the eleventh review of quotas which provides a 45 per cent. increase for the fund—$90 billion—and the special equity allocation of 21.4 billion SDRs which was formally approved at the meetings.

Both the Secretary of State for International Development and I attended the Development Committee meeting where we stressed that corruption and weak governance undermine macroeconomic stability, private sector activity and sustainable development objectives, and may erode international support for development objectives, and may erode international support for development cooperation. We supported calls for criminalisation of bribery and the abolition of tax deductibility of bribes, and for the fund to examine the effects of corruption in governance on countries macroeconomic performance.

A package to alleviate the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency's resource constraints was agreed.

At the joint IMF/World Bank annual meeting I outlined the changes we have made to both monetary and fiscal policies in the UK. I outlined the benefits of giving operational independence to the Bank of England and the benefits clear rules, a new discipline, openness and accountability will bring to fiscal policy. I explained that our task is to secure high and sustainable levels of growth and employment in the UK as well as in the rest of the world.

I stressed the importance of our dependence upon each other and the importance of international cooperation to maintain an open economy. Although we are committed to a constructive partnership with Europe, we must remain open and outward looking to the rest of the world. And above all, regional concerns must never replace international commitments.

Copies of my speeches and the communiqués of these meetings have been put in the Library of the House. There was no G7 communiqué.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Welfare-to-work Programme

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what work opportunities the tourism industry can offer under the welfare-to-work programme. [13397]

Mr. Tom Clarke: Tourism is well placed to play a key role in the new deal/welfare-to-work initiative. It already supports some 1.7 million jobs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has invited around 200 people involved in tourism, hospitality and leisure to a conference later this month to hear more about the proposals and the opportunities they present for the industry to meet its own staffing needs while offering young people real jobs leading to long-term, worthwhile careers.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13611]

Mr. Tom Clarke: As with all matters relating to the running of the Department, ultimate responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport rests with the permanent secretary who is supported in this matter by the head of information systems. Responsibility for the Department's sponsored bodies rests with the individual accounting officers.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement; [13610]

(2) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if he will make a statement. [13608]

(3) if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13607]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has submitted its costed action plan to CCTA. This plan along with those of other Departments will be analysed by CITU and CCTA. The conclusions will be reported to my right hon. Friend, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who then will inform Parliament.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13609]

Mr. Tom Clarke: The cost of preventive and remedial action on Year 2000 will be met from existing PES provision.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13953]

Mr. Chris Smith: Since 1 May 1997, my Department has received 1,647 letters from hon. Members. The average time taken to give full answers is 15 working days.

DEFENCE

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will give in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [13598]

(2) which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13601]

(3) if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13599]

(4) if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully complete on time; and if he will make a statement. [13597]

(5) when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13600]

Mr. Spellar: In accordance with Cabinet Office guidelines, an audit of all computer-based systems across MOD, including the Defence Agencies, has been under way since mid-1996. The audit is being used to identify and assess the Year 2000 compliancy of systems that process date-related information and to measure progress in modification or replacement of affected systems. The audit covers equipment ranging from office systems to front-line military hardware. The audit is one component of the MOD action plan for managing the Year 2000 problem. As is the case with other Departments, a costed action plan has been provided to the Cabinet Office, who are preparing a report for my right hon. Fiend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament of the conclusions. The plans are exempt from disclosure under Category 2 of the Open Government Code of Practice on Access to Government Information which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However, once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public.

No new money is available for resolution of the Year 2000 problem, the costs of which will be met from within existing financial resources.

The Minister with responsibility for Year 2000 action is the Minister for Defence Procurement, Lord Gilbert. Within MOD all budget holders have been made responsible for ensuring that affected systems within their departments are modified or replaced. Overall responsibility for managing the MOD response to the Year 2000 problem lies with the Director General of Information and Communication Services, Major General W. J. P. Robins.

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he *(a)* has had and *(b)* plans to have with his North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Western European Union counterparts on the problems facing computer systems through the century date change; and if he will make a statement. [13504]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD initiated a departmental programme 18 months ago to address Year 2000 date change problems within its computer systems. During this time, the Year 2000 question has been raised with our counterparts in NATO and Allied Nations. They are fully aware of the serious nature of the problem and the actions being taken within UK MOD to ensure that Defence operations are not at risk from failure of systems to process date-related information correctly. We are discussing with our Allies the need for a collaborative approach to ensuring the continued effectiveness of the interconnection between systems on which allied operations depend. Senior-level discussions have taken place with the US Department of Defense on solutions to the Year 2000 problem, which has also been raised within the NATO Command, Control and Communication Board, the most senior committee in NATO dealing with Command and Control Systems, and is being raised within the WEU information systems forum. This will be kept as a high-priority topic within NATO and the WEU, and established as a regular agenda item on the appropriate committees so that progress can be monitored.

Equipment Exhibition (Indonesian Delegation)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which Indonesian delegates attended the Government's Royal Navy and British Army equipment exhibition in September. [13970]

Mr. Spellar: The official Indonesian delegation referred to in the answer that I gave to the hon. Member on 23 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *344*, did not attend the Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition. The Indonesian Defence Attaché in London did, however, attend the exhibition.

Appointments

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list by appointment the officers who constitute the selection board for three and four star appointments in the *(a)* Army, *(b)* Royal Navy and *(c)* Royal Air Force. [14233]

Dr. Reid: The officers who constitute the Services selection boards for promotion to 3 and 4 star appointments are:

Army

Chief of the General Staff,

Commander in Chief Land Command,

Adjutant General,

Quartermaster General,

Master General Ordnance.

Royal Navy

Chief of the Naval Staff,

Second Sea Lord and Commander in Chief Naval Home Command,

Commander in Chief Fleet,

Chief of Fleet Support.

Royal Air Force

For 3 star appointments the Board comprises:

Chief of the Air Staff,

Air Officer Commanding-In-Chief Strike Command,

Air Member for Personnel/Air Officer Commanding-In-Chief, Personnel and Training Command,

Air Officer Commanding-In-Chief Logistics Command.

For 4 star appointments, the Chief of the Air Staff makes recommendations to the Secretary of State.

Trident

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his current estimate of the *(a)* running costs, *(b)* service life expectancy and *(c)* de-commissioning costs of Trident [13988]

Mr. Spellar: Our latest estimate of the running costs of Trident remains as stated by my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces in his answer of 23 June,

Official Report, column 356. As was stated, that estimate included an element for decommissioning and disposal costs; this represented some 5 per cent. of the total. Trident is currently programmed to have an overall service life expectancy of some 30 years.

Eurofighter

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the estimated cost per unit of the Eurofighter. [13103]

Mr. Spellar: The current estimated unit cost of Eurofighter for the UK is £40.2 million at today's prices.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date the Eurofighter will enter squadron service with the Royal Air Force. [13102]

Mr. Spellar: The first Eurofighter is scheduled to be delivered to the Royal Air Force in December 2001.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when Eurofighter will enter service. [13864]

Mr. Spellar: The first Eurofighter is scheduled to be delivered to the Royal Air Force in December 2001.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Eurofighter aircraft have been ordered by *(a)* the UK, *(b)* Germany, *(c)* Italy and *(d)* Spain; and what is each country's workshare. [13862]

Mr. Spellar: The declared aircraft offtake requirements of the nations is: United Kingdom 232, Germany 180, Italy 121 and Spain 87 and these give workshare entitlements of, United Kingdom 37.42 per cent., Germany 29.03 per cent., Italy 19.52 per cent. and Spain 14.03 per cent.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the advantages of Eurofighter over *(a)* Refale, *(b)* Gripen *(c)* Mig 29. [13859]

Mr. Spellar: Studies by the Ministry of Defence have confirmed that Eurofighter is the most cost-effective option to meet the Royal Air Force's currently assessed future needs.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the original estimate of the cost of the Eurofighter project to each of the partners; what are the current projected costs in equivalent terms; and how much each country has already spent. [13863]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence does not have all the information requested in respect of our Eurofighter partners. On the basis of a requirement for 232 aircraft, the UK's estimated procurement cost for Eurofighter at the start of development in 1988 amounted to £13.2 billion at 1997 prices, and the current estimate is £15.9 billion at 1997 prices. Up to 30 September 1997 we have spent a total of £2.8 billion.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his current estimate of the costs to his Department of *(a)* research, *(b)* construction and *(c)* commissioning in respect of the European fighter aircraft. [13987]

Mr. Spellar: The latest estimated costs to the UK of the Eurofighter programme are £4.4 billion for the full development phase, which includes the costs of earlier phases. Further, we currently estimate that it will cost £11.5 billion for the procurement of 232 aircraft. This figure includes the cost of initial support for the aircraft.

NATO Expansion

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the increased defence burden and resulting financial costs placed on *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary and *(c)* the Czech republic as a result of NATO membership. [14003]

Dr. Reid: By joining an alliance whose essential purpose is to safeguard the freedom and security of all its members by collective means, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic will lighten their defence burden, as no single Ally is forced to rely on its own national efforts alone in dealing with basic security challenges.

The costs of enlargement to the three invited countries will fall into two categories: the development of their ability to operate alongside other NATO countries on the full range of Alliance missions; and their contribution to NATO common-funded budgets.

The countries concerned were, in any case, intending to modernise and restructure their Armed Forces. Their contribution to NATO common-funded budgets is being discussed.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the costs of NATO expansion for Britain. [14004]

Dr. Reid: NATO staff are currently studying the military and financial implications of enlargement, and a report will be made to NATO Ministers in December.

NATO Heads of State and Government stated in the Madrid Declaration:

"We are confident that, in line with the security environment of the Europe of today, Alliance costs associated with the integration of new members will be manageable and that the resources necessary to meet those costs will be provided."

That remains our assessment. If additional spending is required, Britain will pay its share.

Arms Exports (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many United Kingdom armed forces or Ministry of Defence personnel are involved in the servicing and maintenance of British Aerospace Hawk aircraft sold to Indonesia; and if he will make a statement. [13969]

Mr. Spellar: None.

Ships (Names)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the criteria for selecting names for new ships of the Royal Navy. [13701]

Mr. Spellar: Proposals for ships names for both the Royal Navy and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary are initiated by the Admiralty Ships Names and Badges Committee which takes into consideration a number of criteria, including the promotion of links with communities, the

geographical spread of names and opportunities to revive those with an honourable history. Selected names are submitted, through the Controller of the Navy and the First Sea Lord, to the Secretary of State for approval. In the case of major vessels, final approval is sought from HM The Queen.

Defence Diversification Agency

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what funding his Department intends to allocate to the Defence Diversification Agency. [14202]

Mr. Spellar: No decision on funding has yet been taken. This will depend on the outcome of the consultation period on our forthcoming Green Paper on diversification.

Naval Forces (Gulf)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what United Kingdom naval forces are currently on station in the Gulf. [14300]

Dr. Reid: The Royal Navy currently has a destroyer and a frigate deployed in the Arabian Gulf engaged on Armilla Patrol duties. They are ably supported by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary.

Contingency and Operational Procurement Exhibition

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost to public funds of the Ministry of Defence police presence at the COPEX exhibition in 1997. [13995]

Mr. Spellar: The cost of the Ministry of Defence Police presence at the COPEX exhibition has not yet been fully assessed. I will write to the hon. Member shortly.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13947]

Mr. Spellar: Statistics are not held in the form requested. My Department has a target of replying to letters from hon. Members within 15 working days of receipt. Since the start of the Session Ministers have replied to 65 per cent. of letters within this target and to 80 per cent. within 20 working days.

Equipment Exhibition

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons questions were not allowed at the press conference at the Government's Royal Navy and British Army equipment exhibition in September. [13672]

Mr. Spellar: The Royal Navy and British Army Equipment Exhibition (RNBAEE) was opened formally by my noble Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement on 1 September. In light of the tragic death of Diana Princess of Wales the previous day, my noble Friend decided to make only a brief opening statement.

At the opening of the press day on 31 August, the Head of Defence Export Services gave a short presentation on the work of his organisation and outlined the key themes of the exhibition. This was an address of welcome and was not planned as a press conference. In the event, in view of the death of the Princess only a few hours earlier, he also severely limited his opening remarks.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the suppliers to his Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13543]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executives of the Defence Bills Agency, the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, the Meteorological Office and the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office. I have asked the Chief Executives to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from I. S. Elrick to Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, dated 4 November 1997:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about outstanding debts to suppliers as, in the main, this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Bills Agency.

Departmental policy is to pay bills promptly within agreed contract terms or, where no such terms exist, within 30 days from receipt of the goods/service or a valid invoice, whichever is the later. The Defence Bills Agency pays very high volumes of bills and individual instances where these payment targets were not met could only be listed and valued at disproportionate cost. During the period 1 April–30 September 97, this Agency received 1.75 million bills of which 188 narrowly missed their due 30-day target. Howeve,r I can assure you that these bills were paid shortly after 30 days.

I hope this is of assistance.

Letter from John Clarke to Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, dated 4 November 1997:

You recently asked the Secretary of State for Defence a Parliamentary Question about outstanding debts to suppliers. As this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, I have been asked to reply to you directly.

All departments are required to pay their bills within agreed contract terms, or 30 days from receipt of the goods or service or a valid invoice, whichever is the later, where no such terms exist. Such detailed information on payment performance for the current financial year could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97.

I hope the information provided has been of some assistance.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, dated 4 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Defence has asked me as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency to reply to your question about suppliers who are owed outstanding amounts.

The Agency's policy is to pay bills promptly within agreed contract terms or, where no such terms exist, within 30 days of receipt of a validated invoice. DERA currently pays 98% of invoices without queries within these targets; during the month of October 1997, 98.2% of cleared invoices were paid on time. Detailed data on individual suppliers could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996/97.

Letter from Peter Ewins to Mrs. Cheryl Gillan, dated 4 November 1997:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about outstanding debt to suppliers. For the Meterological Office, this matter falls to me as the Chief Executive.

Our payment policy is to pay suppliers within 30 days of receipt of the invoice within the Meteorological Office, or of the delivery date if later. For the period 1 June 1996 to 31 March 1997, over 90% of the valid invoices were paid within 30 days of receipt. We will continue to work to improve this performance. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departments payment performance for 1996/97. Detailed information on payment performance for the current financial year could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Attorney-General if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14376]

The Attorney General: None.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Drugs

37. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement about the Government's policy to curb the misuse of drugs. [12033]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Prime Minister announced last month that Keith Hellawell—currently Chief Constable of West Yorkshire—would be the new UK anti-drugs co-ordinator, and will take up his post early in the New Year. He will be supported by a deputy, Michael Trace. The co-ordinator's first priority will be to review existing action against drugs across the board, and then make recommendations to Ministers for further developments.

41. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the result of the Government's strategy on the reduction in the use of illegal drugs. [12037]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The most recent national data on the prevalence of drug misuse are from the 1996 British Crime Survey (BCS). The report concludes that between the 1994 and 1996 BCS, there was essentially no change in levels of drug misuse across England and Wales as a whole. I have asked Keith Hellawell to consider the implications of these findings.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Probation Studies Diploma

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the proposed diploma in probation studies will require a full-time course of study; how long the course will last; and at which institutions it will be available. [12731]

Joyce Quin: The new arrangements for the recruitment and training of probation officers, which I announced in a reply to the hon. member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg) on 29 July, *Official Report*, column *151*, will be employment led. Trainee probation officers will be employed by their local probation services while they work towards the new combined diploma and national vocational qualification. The length of the training period will vary according to trainees' previous work and academic experience. Work is under way to implement these new arrangements, but it is too early to say which institutions will offer the diploma.

Remand

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to limit the period for which people accused of non-violent crimes may be held on remand prior to cases coming before the courts; and if he will make a statement. [13324]

Mr. Michael: The Government are determined to ensure that defendants should spend as little time as possible on remand awaiting trial. The period for which those charged with indictable offences may be held in custody on remand is already restricted by statutory custody time limits. Unfortunately, it is clear that in far too many cases it has been necessary for the courts to extend those time limits and the Government intend to introduce stricter criteria in the forthcoming Crime and Disorder Bill to govern the court's decision to grant extensions to limits.

The remand decision, whatever the offence charged, is, of course, a matter for the court in the exercise of its judicial discretion in accordance with the Bail Act 1976. That Act establishes a statutory right to bail for all defendants involved in criminal proceedings, subject to certain exceptions. Bail may be withheld only in the case of a person accused of an offence punishable with imprisonment if the court is satisfied that there are substantial grounds for believing that, if released on bail, that person would abscond, commit an offence, interfere with witnesses or otherwise obstruct the course of justice.

In taking a remand decision, the court has to consider the nature and seriousness of the offence, the character, antecedents and community ties of the defendant, his past record under any previous grants of bail and the strength of the evidence against his having committed the offence, as well as any other considerations which appear relevant.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reform the remand system; and if he will make a statement. [13720]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The consultation paper, "Tackling Delays in the Youth Justice System", published on 15 October, sets out a number of legislative proposals which are intended to remove obstacles to the speedy and efficient handling of cases, introduce new and more effective procedures and establish greater discipline in the processing of cases through the setting up of statutory time limits. The deadline for comments on the paper is 12 November 1997.

The consultation paper, "Reducing Remand Delays", was issued on 23 October 1997. It sets out the time limits proposals in the context of the adult courts. It provides a little more detail on the procedural aspect of the new

measures—for example, the mechanics of reinstituting proceedings—than the "Tackling Delays in the Youth Justice System" paper. For the sake of completeness, the "Reducing Remand Delays" paper also includes the other non-Narey legislative measures aimed at reducing delays in all courts: the two new bail measures and the power to conduct pre-trial hearings by live television link. The deadline for comments on the proposals in this paper is 14 November 1997.

Copies of both these documents have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the Bail Act 1976 to ensure that courts take notice of the effects that remands in custody may have on the mental and physical health of defendants; and if he will make a statement. [13723]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The remand decision is a matter for the courts in the exercise of their judicial discretion in accordance with the Bail Act 1976. That Act establishes a statutory right to bail for all defendants involved in criminal proceedings, subject to certain exceptions. Bail may be withheld only in the case of a person accused of an offence punishable with imprisonment if the court is satisfied that there are substantial grounds for believing that, if released on bail, that person would abscond, commit an offence, interfere with witnesses or otherwise obstruct the course of justice. In taking a remand decision, the Bail Act requires courts to consider the nature and seriousness of the offence, the character, antecedents and community ties of the defendant, his past record under any previous grants of bail, and the strength of the evidence against his having committed the offence as well as any other considerations which appear relevant. Courts may seek information from the probation service and advice of health care professionals to assist them. They will also have regard to any representations made by the prosecution or defence. In addition, courts may use the provisions of the Mental Health Act 1983 to enable appropriate mentally disordered persons to be remanded to hospital rather than prison.

I have no plans to alter these arrangements but will consider ways of improving the information available to the court on the mental health of defendants the better to inform decisions, including an assessment of risk to the public.

Firearms Compensation Scheme

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what is the average time taken to process compensation payments for people who have handed in handguns to the police; [13904]

(2) what action he is taking to reduce the time it is taking to process compensation payments for people who have handed in handguns to the police. [13905]

Mr. Michael: Claims submitted under options A and B of the compensation scheme are being processed in 12–14 weeks. The more complicated option C claims will be processed when the bulk of these have been cleared.

More than 37,800 compensation claims and ex gratia applications under the small calibre pistol scheme have been received since 1 July, and the volume is such that some delays are inevitable. More than 14,200 payments have been made to a value of more than £17 million.

It has always been recognised that the pressure of claims received over a short hand-in period was bound to lead to processing delays, and claimants were advised that they may have to wait several weeks before receiving any payment. Despite that, an additional factor in delay is the burden of telephone enquiries about the progress of claims. A recent survey showed that the Home Office was receiving around 2,000 such calls a week.

As I promised in July, everything possible is being done to process claims in the shortest time possible. For instance, weekend overtime is being worked and staff have been temporarily promoted to boost examiner numbers. I wish to record my thanks to everyone who has contributed to the efforts to date including officials and the police officers involved.

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about non-payment of claims submitted under the firearms compensation scheme which have been agreed by the receiving constabulary; and if he will make a statement. [14049]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* A number of inquiries have been received about the progress of individual compensation claims. The firearms compensation section is dealing with claims as quickly as possible, and in the order in which they are received. It has so far made over 14,200 payments to the value of over £17 million. The sheer number of claims received over the three-month hand-in period means that some processing delays are inevitable. That was explained to the House when the scheme was approved, but, as promised, we are doing all that we can to keep these to a minimum.

New Prison (Colchester)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment exercises his Department has conducted into the possibility of establishing a prison in the Colchester constituency during the past five years. [13700]

Joyce Quin: The Prison Service has had a long standing interest in developing a new prison in the east London/Essex area. This will provide new prison places to meet the population increases now being projected and help reduce the overcrowding currently being experienced within London prisons, to which large numbers of young offenders and adult prisoners from the Essex area are sent.

A number of sites in the east London/Essex area have been looked at by the Prison Service in recent years. One site in the Colchester area was investigated some two years ago, but was considered too small for a prison development.

Another possible site in Colchester has been recently drawn to the attention of the Prison Service. This is now being assessed, but it is too early to say whether it will prove suitable to be pursued further.

Feltham Young Offenders Institute

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Prison Service about alleged assaults by prison officers against Mr. Carlos Pulgaria at Feltham young offenders institute on 5 September; if the officers against whom the allegations were made are still on duty; and if he will make a statement. [13971]

Joyce Quin: Mr. Carlos Pulgarin has alleged that while he was in Feltham young offender institution in September he was assaulted by prison officers. Because of the seriousness of the allegations, the governor referred the matter to the police to investigate. I understand that the police have sent their report on the incident to the Crown Prosecution Service, who are considering what action to take. The officers against whom the allegations were made are at present on special leave.

Butane Gas

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will amend the terms of the Intoxicating Substances Supply Act 1985 so as to introduce a strict liability clause with regard to the sale of Butane gas lighter refills to under 16-year-olds, if he will nominate an enforcement agency for the application of the act; and if he will make a statement. [13703]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no plans to amend the Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs undertook a study into volatile substance abuse, the results of which were published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office in 1995. A copy of their report is in the Library. They concluded that there were no acceptable legislative changes that would do more than the Act already does to protect young people. Responsibility for enforcement of the provisions of the Act rests with the police.

Daylight Saving

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the evidence of the effect of the end of British summer time on levels of crime. [13760]

Mr. George Howarth: A 1996 Home Office analysis suggested that an extra hour's light at the end of winter days might slightly reduce overall notifiable offences. However, this assumed no offsetting changes in offenders' and the general public's behaviour. If there were, some opportunities for crime might increase.

Intrusive Surveillance

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department under what circumstances MI5 operatives are allowed to undertake intrusive surveillance without first obtaining a warrant. [13781]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* There are no circumstances under which Security Service officers would be allowed to carry out intrusive surveillance involving entry on to or interference with property which would otherwise be unlawful, except under authority of a warrant issued by the Secretary of State under the Intelligence Services Act 1994.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13952]

Mr. Straw: The average time taken to reply to letters from hon. Members is 25 working days. The target response times in my Department are 15 days for the Home Office, 25 for the immigration and nationality directorate, the United Kingdom Passport Agency and Her Majesty's Prison Service. Departmental performance is shown in the annual statistics that were published on 17 June 1997 in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) on 17 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *107–12*. Some targets were shortened earlier this year. These will be reflected in the 1997 annual statistics that will be published in due course.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement; [13572]

(2) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [13573]

Mr. Straw: My Department's costed action plans will be sent to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) this week. The plans will be analysed by the Central Information Technology Unit and CCTA and the conclusions reported to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament. The plans will be exempted from disclosure under the Open Government Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However, once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13574]

Mr. Straw: My Department is proceeding on the basis that the cost of preventive and remedial action on the millennium problem will be met from existing public expenditure survey provision.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13575]

Mr. Straw: My Department's main information technology service provider—Sema Group—completed an audit covering the bulk of our systems in late 1996. Since then, business areas have been reviewing, updating and prioritising their inventories as part of the process of preparing their costed action plans.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13576]

Mr. Straw: I am the Minister responsible for ensuring millennium compliance in my Department. The civil servant with responsibility for this work is the director of corporate resources.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* dates of and *(b)* participants in meetings he has held with the cosmetics industry and researchers to discuss a voluntary ban on cosmetic testing on animals. [13679]

Mr. George Howarth: The industry has been consulted through representative groups and by informal means. no meetings have been necessary. My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State will be in a position to make an announcement on Thursday about developments concerning cosmetics testing, the use of great apes in scientific procedures, welfare committees in designated establishments and the composition of the Animal Procedures Committee.

Car Boot Sales

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received requesting the introduction of a licensing system for car boot sales. [13309]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

My Department has received seven letters making such a request since May 1997. We are currently considering whether further controls are required over temporary markets, such as car boot sales, which are currently permitted for up to 14 days in any calendar year under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Answers

36. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the President of the Council what discussions she has had to encourage greater transparency in the answers to parliamentary questions. [12031]

Mrs Ann Taylor: Ministers are under a duty—set out in the ministerial code—to be as open as possible with Parliament and the public, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with relevant statute and the code of practice on access to Government information.

WPC Yvonne Fletcher

38. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the President of the Council if she will set up a Select Committee on the re-analysis by the Metropolitan police of the circumstances surrounding the murder of WPC Yvonne Fletcher. [12034]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: No, this would not be appropriate in the circumstances. The police investigation is continuing. The necessary analysis and inquiries are complex; and the police will complete them as soon as is possible.

Semicircular Seating

39. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the President of the Council what progress she has made on assessing the advantages of a semicircular seating arrangement for the House. [12035]

Mrs Ann Taylor: None. As I said in the House on 17 June at column 111, I believe that we are a long way from any consensus that the shape of the Chamber should be changed. I have no proposals to make any structural changes to the Chamber.

Modernisation of the House

40. **Mr. Winnick:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the progress made in respect of the proposals from the Modernisation of the House Committee. [12036]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Committee reported on 23 July and a debate on its conclusions is to be held shortly.

Recesses (School Holidays)

Mr. Gapes: To ask the President of the Council what plans she has to arrange parliamentary business so that recesses coincide with school holidays. [12030]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I am aware of my hon. Friend's concern. As I previously told the House, I am in favour of our periodic Adjournments coinciding with school holidays whenever possible.

I remain mindful of hon. Members' views and of the representations that have been made. The Modernisation Committee will soon be looking at the parliamentary calendar, and school holidays and half-terms will be one of the issues to be addressed.

Advisory Committee on Works of Art

Sir Patrick Cormack: To ask the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what are the membership and terms of reference of the Advisory Committee on Works of Art. [14034]

Mr. Kirkwood: I understand that Madam Speaker has appointed the following Members to the Advisory Committee on Works of Art: the hon. Members for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), for Staffordshire, South (Sir P. Cormack), for Dudley, North (Mr. Cranston), for Wantage (Mr. Jackson), for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), for Blackpool, South (Mr. Marsden), for Glasgow, Cathcart (Mr. Maxton) and for Windsor (Mr. Trend).

The terms of reference of the Committee are:

to advise the Speaker generally on matters relating to works of art, including acquisitions; and to advise the Accommodation and Works Committee on the policy on, conservation of, and curatorial management of the collections of pictures, statues, murals, historic furniture and furnishings and decorative interior of the Palace; and advise on the decorative interiors of other buildings in the Parliamentary Estate when requested by that Committee.

Members' Staff

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has to increase the numbers of staff available to hon. Members. [12025]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: None. Members can employ staff out of their office costs allowance, which was reviewed by the SSRB in July 1996.

Statutory Instruments

Mr. Steen: To ask the President of the Council how many Statutory Instruments have been made since 31 July without parliamentary scrutiny; and if she will make a statement as to the future arrangements for dealing with these instruments. [13956]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The number of Statutory Instruments laid was 153. I have no plans at present to make a statement on the future arrangements for dealing with these instruments.

Student Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if he will take measures to assist *(a)* hon. Members, *(b)* members of the press gallery and *(c)* officials of the House in giving access to the precincts of the House to work experience/school students. [12032]

Mrs. Roe: The Administration Committee has no responsibility for *(a)* and *(b)*. With respect to *(c)*, I wish to advise the hon. Gentleman that the Establishments Office of the Finance and Administration Department co-ordinates a work experience scheme through which Departments of the House accommodate students who wish to spend a period of time working at the House of Commons.

Students who express an interest in such work experience are asked to supply details of the type of work in which they are interested and the dates on which they are available. Details are then circulated to departments to ascertain the availability of suitable opportunities.

The Establishment Office endeavours to place 12 students each year for periods of between one and two weeks—more than 20 students have been placed within departments of the House in the last 12 months. The students are not paid, but travelling expenses are re-imbursed.

The education unit has for 17 years arranged a special programme of autumn visits for senior school students, and an extension to this scheme, to run on sitting Wednesdays, was approved in March this year. This is in addition to the large numbers of tours given by hon. Members themselves for individual school parties.

Smoking

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee if he will seek to extend non-smoking policies to the division lobbies and other Members' facilities in the House. [12026]

Mrs. Roe: Hon. Members should be aware already that smoking is not permitted in the Division Lobbies at any time. The Administration Committee has no responsibility for smoking policy in hon. Members' offices—this is a matter for the hon. Member or Members concerned. Similarly, smoking policy in Refreshment Department outlets is a matter for the Catering Committee. However, I shall draw to the attention of my Committee any proposals from hon. Members concerning the possible extension of non-smoking policies to other Members' facilities in the House.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Coal Board Housing

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will investigate what records of the disposal programme of houses by the Coal Board have been retained by British Coal. [13662]

Mr. Battle: British Coal retains records relating to property sales as long as there remains a prudent commercial reason for so doing. This is generally for a period of 12 years to ensure that British Coal can assess any claims made against it by a purchaser.

Cornish Tin Mining Industry

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action her Department is taking to assist the Cornish tin mining industry. [13225]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Following the announcement on 7 August by South Crofty plc of the intention to close the South Crofty tin mine, officials from the Government Office for the South West have been working closely with the mine on a range of proposals. A delegation led by my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) met my hon. Friend the Minister for Small Firms on 10 September. An application from South Crofty plc for regional selective assistance was received by the Department of Trade and Industry on 20 October 1997. The assessment of the application is being given the highest possible priority so that an early decision can be reached. It will be considered against the normal criteria for the scheme. These include demonstrating the viability of the project.

Bank of Credit and Commerce International

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she plans to meet the liquidators of BCCI; and when she expects the next payment to be made to the creditors of BCCI. [14252]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no plans to meet the joint liquidators. The timetable for future payments to creditors is a matter for the liquidators but I understand that they hope to pay a substantial further dividend as soon as possible.

Yemen (Trade Mission)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the recent trade mission to Yemen led by HRH the Duke of Gloucester. [14228]

Mrs. Roche: HRH the Duke of Gloucester visited Yemen from 28 September to 3 October in his capacity as President of the British Consultants Bureau. He was accompanied by 29 representatives of UK companies on a DTI supported trade mission jointly sponsored by the BCB and the Middle East Association. The DTI export promoter and country officer for Yemen were also in attendance.

During this high profile and successful mission, HRH met the President and Vice President of Yemen, the Governors of Taiz and Aden as well as five Ministers, senior Government officials, businessmen and diplomats. HRH attended the missioners' meetings with the Sana's chamber of commerce and the seminar organised by BCB. He also visited Taiz and in Aden he inaugurated the premises of the new consulate-general and opened the new British Council teaching centre. Missioners held a meeting with Aden chamber of commerce and attended briefings on Aden's infrastructure development needs and the port/free zone development.

Small and Medium Enterprises

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she is taking to encourage the establishment and growth of small firms in Staffordshire. [13890]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The Government recognises the vital role that small firms play in a successful enterprise economy and is firmly committed to providing the right conditions for the sector to compete and grow.

Government funding supports initiatives which help both the establishment and growth of small firms in Staffordshire.

Under the first round of the single regeneration budget challenge fund up to £1.28 million over six years has been committed towards establishing 2,000 new businesses and 3,600 jobs in Staffordshire. The Government Office for the West Midlands has contracted with Staffordshire training and enterprise council to manage this programme.

The Government Office also holds an annual contract with the training and enterprise council, worth approximately £1.7 million, to fund Business Link Staffordshire. The purpose of the Business Link is to help small businesses become more competitive, more successful and better able to meet challenges of the next decade. The Business Link offers independent specialist advice to help businesses identify and address their problems through a tailored package of support.

Partnership Legislation

Mr. Timms: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when further progress is planned on limited liability partnership legislation. [14580]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We are working towards a policy announcement and publication of draft legislation as soon as possible next year.

Regional Challenge

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if there will be a further round of the regional challenge competition for the allocation of European structural funds grants. [14582]

Mrs. Beckett: The Government has decided that the further round of the regional challenge competition will not go ahead and the prize fund of £160 million will return to the regions eligible for structural funds grants. This will restore decision-making on funding allocations to the regions and relieve local partners of the considerable burden involved in the administration of the challenge approach.

The first round of regional challenge did, of course, produce some imaginative projects with potentially significant regional benefits, and we wish these projects every success. However, the original aims of the challenge can now be achieved through other mechanisms. The new "action plan" approach, to be introduced on a flexible basis in England, will encourage a strong strategic focus on high quality projects which can make a real difference to the regional economy and attract private sector contributions, whilst avoiding the additional administrative burdens of regional challenge.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13586]

Mrs. Roche: The President of the Board of Trade has overall responsibility for the Department's work including that related to the year 2000 compliance of its computer systems. The Department's director of information management and technology, Dick Wheeler, has management responsibility for the core Department's programme of compliance projects and related activities. Chief executives of agencies and other public bodies have similar responsibilities for their programmes.

EU Enlargement

Mr. Coaker: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she plans to consult United Kingdom businesses on the enlargement of the EU to the countries of central and eastern Europe. [14579]

Mrs. Roche: Today Lord Simon is publishing a consultation document which seeks the views of UK businesses, consumers and employees on the enlargement of the EU to the countries of central and eastern Europe.

The Government is committed to successful EU enlargement. It will not only enhance the security and stability of the continent, but also introduce 100 million extra consumers into the internal market, bringing greater opportunities for British businesses and greater choice and value for British consumers. We think British businesses appreciate this—indeed, they are already increasingly turning towards these important emerging markets. But enlargement presents major challenges as well as great opportunities for the EU, and we want to be sure that we are representing the interests of UK businesses, employees and consumers as accurately as we can in

discussions in Brussels and elsewhere. So I urge all those with an interest in the future development of the EU to take this opportunity to let us know what they think.

I have placed a copy of the consultation document in the library of the House. Copies can be obtained from:

EU Enlargement Consultation
EU Enlargement Unit
Department of Trade and Industry
66-74 Victoria Street
LONDON
SW1E 6SW
Tel. 0171 215 4407
Fax 0171 215 4469

Comments should be sent to the same address, to arrive by 20 March 1998.

The document can also be found on the DTI internet homepage at: http://www.dti.gov.uk

Bio-Technology

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade on what date the ethical and welfare review of bio-technology and the patenting of animals began; and if she will make a statement. [13678]

Mr. Battle: A report produced in 1995 by a committee chaired by Professor Michael Banner and appointed by the then Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food produced a report which considered the ethical implications of emerging technologies in the breeding of farm animals. The committee's review included the question of patenting genetically modified animals.

The DTI is in the process of consulting widely on the question of animal patenting in the context of the proposed directive for the protection of bio-technological inventions.

Export Forum

Mr. Goggins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will publish the conclusions of the Export Forum. [14581]

Mrs. Beckett: "Towards an Export Initiative"—the report of the Export Forum—has today been published and a copy placed in the Library of the House.

The Export Forum was established by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in July of this year. Its remit was to examine the effectiveness of current Government support for UK exporters and to make recommendations for a new export initiative.

The forum has concluded that government has a vital and essential role to play in export promotion. It recommends that the Government could discharge this role more effectively by taking action in the following areas.

- focusing additional effort on a small number of key overseas markets, as opposed to dividing all its effort between 80 "priority markets";
- selecting these markets both with a view to the needs of the new and inexperienced exporter and with a view to helping all exporters attack difficult but promising markets where the UK is currently underperforming;
- incorporating the strengths and priorities of key sectors of UK industry into the planning process, with a better focus on service industries in particular;
- enhancing the support that it gives to UK firms seeking to invest overseas;
- ensuring greater consistency and improved quality in the export services delivered by Business Links and in the chargeable work of FCO posts;
- strengthening the marketing and branding of Government export support to obtain greater coherence and a more customer-friendly interface;
- making greater use of IT and the Internet in delivering services to UK exporters;
- restructuring and strengthening the British Overseas Trade Board as the Government's key advisory body on export promotion.

The Government welcomes the forum's report and the thrust of its recommendations. We will be looking to respond positively and to start work now in many of the areas outlined by the forum as requiring change. Our response in respect of some of the forum's recommendations will need to await the completion of the DTI and FCO comprehensive spending reviews.

European Council

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what documents Her Majesty's Government intends to place before the European Council due to meet in Luxembourg on 21 to 22 November to discuss employment in the European Community; and if he will place in the Library any such submission at least 10 days before that event. [13386]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In the context of the remit established at the Amsterdam European Council, the Government has submitted two papers: "Employment Policies and Initiatives in the UK", July 1997, and "United Kingdom Employment Action Plan", October 1997. Copies of both these papers are in the Library.

WALES

Beta Interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the cost of prescribing beta interferon in each year since 1995 for each health authority. [13476]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The expenditure on Beta Interferon across the NHS in Wales since 1995 is £8,764. This figure excludes clinical trials for which there is no data available. There is a risk that to provide a more detailed breakdown of this figure might breach patient confidentiality.

Schools (Funding)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the amount of extra funding which will be available for Welsh school education in 1997 as a result of the windfall tax. [14175]

Mr. Hain: £5,025 million capital funding is available this financial year for repair, refurbishment,improvements to school buildings; improvements to school security; and improvements to information technology facilities.

Dental Services

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what are the latest figures *(a)* in total and *(b)* by county for the number of dental practitioners in practice in Wales offering treatment on the national health service; and if he will make a statement. [14082]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The information is given in the following table. The information is collected on a health authority basis.

General dental practitioners who treat at least some NHS patients at 30 June 1997

Health authority	*Number*
North Wales	198
Dyfed Powys	142
Morgannwg	173
Bro Taf	221
Gwent	173
Wales	907

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) how many dental practitioners were in practice in Wales in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* at the latest available date; and if he will make a statement; [14086]

(2) how many dental practitioners offering treatment under the national health service there were in practice in Wales in each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [14090]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Information on the number of general practitioners who treat at least some NHS patients is given in the following table. Information on the number of practitioners only treating patients privately is not collected centrally.

General dental practitioners who treat at least some NHS patients

	Number
September 1992	831
September 1993	843
September 1994	849
September 1995	876
September 1996	900
June 1997	907

Inward Investment

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many jobs were created or secured by inward investment in each North Wales county in each of the last five years. [14211]

Mr. Hain: The following statistics relate to companies' intentions at the time of the decision to invest and do not take account of any subsequent changes. The employment figures—safeguarded and new combined—are forecasts, not actual, and relate to inward investment from elsewhere in the United Kingdom as well as from overseas.

Year	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Clwyd	2,414	3,072	1,256	752	1,337
Gwynedd	1,009	885	654	89	231

Information on a unitary authority basis is not yet available; the statistics are for the areas covered by the former counties of Clwyd and Gwynedd.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13626]

Mr. Ron Davis: As Secretary of State I have overall responsibility for ensuring compliance in my Department. The civil servant responsible for Millennium issues within the Department is Dr. A. G. Thornton. In the case of public bodies it is the responsibility of the relevant chief executive.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000; [13624]

(2) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [13623]

Mr. Ron Davies: My Department has made an assessment of the effect of the millennium date change. I do not expect there to be any major costs involved in ensuring that my Department's computer systems can cater for the year 2000. Cost of future preventative and remedial action on year 2000 will be met from existing PES provision.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13622]

Mr. Ron Davies: The costed action plans for all Departments will be analysed by officials in the central IT unit at the Cabinet Office and the CCTA and the conclusions reported to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament. The plans will be exempted from disclosure under the open government code of practice on access to government information which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However, once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13625]

Mr. Ron Davies: The central IT unit at the Cabinet Office and its agent the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency set a model timetable for

Departments to follow. The Welsh Office has followed this timetable and completed by January 1997 a full survey of the work which needed to be done.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Food and Drink Industry

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact on United Kingdom food and drink producers of *(a)* a national minimum wage, *(b)* the Government's welfare-to-work proposals and *(c)* economic and monetary union. [13379]

Mr. Morley: We are aware of some early assessments of policies within the responsibility of other Departments and where many decisions both of principle and of detail remain to be taken. Although we have not at this stage undertaken separate studies of the impact of such policies specifically on United Kingdom food and drink producers, we carefully consider the likely implications for all the sectors for which the Department is responsible.

Bananas

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list in respect of imports of bananas into *(a)* the European Economic Community and *(b)* the United Kingdom (i) the Community quotas in percentage, approximate tonnage, and value of imports of each of category A, B and C of imports, together with the principal producers in each category, (ii) the approximate difference between the production and selling price to consumers of dollar, category A, and African, Caribbean and Pacific country, category B, African, Caribbean and Pacific country, bananas and (iii) the tonnage and value of banana exports from each Commonwealth source exported to the United Kingdom in the year before and each year since the introduction of the 1993 banana regime. [13388]

Mr. Morley: (i) Twelve African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries which traditionally supplied bananas to the EU have individual export allocations under the EU regime. These total 857,700 tonnes of bananas. The countries are Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Jamaica, Belize, Suriname, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Somalia, Cape Verde and Madagascar.

Other imports of bananas enter the EU within an annual tariff quota; since the enlargement of the EU in 1995 this has been set at 2.553 million tonnes. This figure includes a small allocation for ACP imports outside the traditional quotas. There are three types of licences for importing bananas within the tariff quota: Category A licences (66.5 per cent. of the tariff quota) are allocated on the basis of past trade in third country and non-traditional ACP bananas; Category B licences (30 per cent. of the tariff quota) are allocated on the basis of past trade in EU or traditional ACP bananas; Category C licences (3.5 per cent.) are allocated to traders who do not have a record of trade in bananas before 1993. The tariff quota licences can be used freely to import third-country or non-traditional ACP bananas, i.e. their use is not linked to imports from a particular supplying country. The principal suppliers of bananas within the tariff quota are Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Panama.

The table shows imports from ACP and third country sources into the EU and UK between 1992 and 1996:

UK and EU[1] imports of ACP and non ACP[2] fresh bananas
Value (in thousands of ECU[3]) and volume (in tonnes)

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
ACP imports					
UK					
Value	224,921	232,142	216,610	216,987	239,559
Volume	363,274	377,734	348,488	381,315	411,857
EU					
Value	407,970	437,728	439,612	417,394	437,442
Volume	680,185	748,109	728,064	765,489	802,055
Non ACP imports[2]					
UK					
Value[4]	37,901	33,034	45,899	46,880	47,653
Volume	92,524	77,113	93,241	100,769	88,347
EU					
Value[4]	973,392	902,595	1,088,005	1,279,786	1,390,653
Volume	2,367,348	2,220,521	2,122,999	2,399,162	2,689,041

Notes:
The above figures were extracted from the EUROSTAT Comext database on 30 October 1997 and may be subject to future amendment.
[1] Up to 1994 figures are for the EU12, thereafter the EU15.
[2] Not including the Canary Islands, Guadeloupe and Martinique, which are part of the EU.
[3] Animal ECU/£ exchange rates are as follows: 1992: 0.7376; 1993: 0.7800; 1994: 0.7736; 1995: 0.8290; 1996: 0.8108;
[4] Values do not include import tariff.
Source:
European Commission.

(ii) Information on production prices of bananas for ACP suppliers or dollar suppliers is not available. Average UK retail prices for bananas from all sources since 1992 were as follows:

	Pence per pound
1992	47.99
1993	45.56
1994	45.15
1995	41.48
1996	42.17

I regret that no information is available on the average price paid by EU consumers.

(iii) Volumes and values of imports from Commonwealth countries into the United Kingdom since 1992 are set out in the table below:

UK imports of fresh bananas from Commonwealth countries
Value (in thousands of ECU[1]) and volume (in tonnes[2])

	1992	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
Dominica					
Value	28,926	28,336	22,761	17,577	21,633
Volume	44,658	46,498	37,819	31,773	39,307
St. Lucia					
Value	70,810	65,878	51,062	53,758	61,982
Volume	111,348	106,224	85,741	99,599	106,670

UK imports of fresh bananas from Commonwealth countries
Value (in thousands of ECU[1]) and volume (in tonnes[2])

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
St. Vincent					
Value	35,746	32,538	17,455	25,593	25,476
Volume	56,233	53,380	28,236	46,852	44,175
Grenada					
Value	3,850	4,039	3,265	2,394	1,133
Volume	6,011	6,720	5,325	4,556	2,007
Jamaica					
Value	46,625	46,932	52,424	49,699	52,594
Volume	74,775	77,057	76,401	83,824	89,496
Belize					
Value	15,064	23,643	28,172	24,215	25,402
Volume	28,323	38,366	46,980	42,033	52,130
Cameroon					
Value	5,127	5,999	13,184	13,217	19,473
Volume	6,702	10,847	25,046	20,457	25,008
Ghana					
Value	118	255	166	50	233
Volume	91	181	139	51	189
Total value	206,806	207,618	188,490	186,502	207,926
Total volume	328,140	339,273	305,686	329,146	358,982

Notes:

The above figures were extracted from the EUROSTAT Comext database on 30 October 1997 and may be subject to future amendment.

[1] Annual ECU/£ exchange rates are as follows: 1992: 0.7376; 1993: 0.7800; 1994: 0.7736; 1995: 0.8290; 1996: 0.8108.

[2] Volumes released into free circulation in the UK.

Source:

European Commission.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to protect the Caribbean banana producers market in the United Kingdom and Europe; and if he will make a statement. [13664]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The Government are considering the World Trade Organisation (WTO) findings on the EU banana regime in liaison with the Commission in Brussels, who have the principal responsibility for the Community's response. We are disappointed by the WTO ruling but we accept that the Community must now set about revising the EU arrangements to bring them into conformity with WTO rules.

The UK's commitment to banana production in the Caribbean is a long-standing one. This Government are in no doubt about the vital importance of the banana industry to the Caribbean and will continue to ensure that the interests of the Caribbean banana growers are fully recognised in the negotiations on the new WTO-consistent arrangements. The Caribbean must be given the opportunity to prove that it can sustain a viable industry committed to providing a good quality product at a competitive price to the European consumer.

Multi-annual Guidance Programme

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the European Commission proposes to apply financial penalties following the report on multi-annual guidance programme III; and if he will make a statement. [13869]

Mr. Morley: Under the terms of Council Regulation 3699/93, Member States which have not complied with their Multi-Annual Guidance Programme (MAGP) objectives are not eligible for EU funding in respect of vessel construction or modernisation grants. It is also open to the European Commission to invoke the provisions of the Treaty in respect of any failure to meet obligations which they consider sufficiently serious.

As far as the Commission's Report on MAGP III is concerned, the section devoted to the UK refers to two outstanding requests for adjustments to our objectives and to the need for certain discrepancies in fleet registers to be corrected.

The Commission subsequently put proposals to the Fisheries Management Committee on 27–28 October which are expected to be adopted shortly. They have the effect of amending the UK MAGP III objectives for the purposes of setting new objectives for MAGP IV. These changes would meet all the points which we have put to the Commission. Details are given in the table.

UK fishing fleet: MAGP III objectives (as revised for MAGP IV) and position at 31 December 1996

Segment	*MAGP III objective GRT*	*Position at end 1996 GRT*	*MAGP III objective kW*	*Position at end 1996 kW*	*Shortfall from revised objectives (per cent.)*[1] *GRT*	*kW*
Over 10 metre vessels						
Pelagic gears	24,323	27,801	82,168	71,876	13	–14
Beam trawls	19,004	22,104	91,140	117,616	14	23
Demersal, seines, nephrops[2]	78,195	75,570	422,876	400,127	–3	–6
Lines and nets	13,134	13,613	67,364	51,977	4	–30
Shellfish mobile	8,394	8,504	51,232	55,648	1	8
Shellfish fixed	5,264	5,387	35,895	44,463	2	19
Distant water	10,204	12,423	22,384	26,853	18	17
Under 10 metre vessels[3]	*22,697*	*20,851*	*286,154*	*286,367*	–9	0
Total	181,216	186,262	1,059,212	1,054,927	3	0

[1] A negative percentage figure represents the over-achievement of the objective.

[2] For MAGP III, there were separate segments for demersal trawls and seines and for nephrops gears. The revised objectives and positions at end–1996 were:

Demersal trawls and seines—GRT objective: 59,470; GRT position: 64,534; Power objective: 316,399; Power position: 332,337.

Nephrops—GRT objective: 18,725; GRT position: 11,036; Power objective: 106,477; Power position: 67,790.

[3] The previous non-active/non-TAC segment has been eliminated by redistributing the vessels and related objectives across the remaining over 10 metre segments.

Sheep

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that sheep exported from the United Kingdom are identified in such a way that they can be traced back to the holding of birth in accordance with the requirement of EC directive 92/102; and if he will make a statement. [13932]

Mr. Rooker: A consultation letter was issued on 13 October 1997 to GB trade organisations seeking their views on changes to the legislation in Great Britain which would enable better tracing of sheep to the holding of birth. The consultation period ends on 24 November 1997. Legislation came into force in Northern Ireland from 1 August 1997 requiring sheep moved from the holding of birth to be identified with a flock or herd mark.

Cows

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the total number of cows of each identifiable breed in *(a)* the national dairy herd and *(b)* the national suckler herd. [14178]

Mr. Rooker: The Department collects no information on the breakdown of cattle by breed, but the provisional results for England from the 1997 June Agricultural Census show that there are a total of *(a)* 1,701,000 cows in the national dairy herd and *(b)* 798,000 cows in the national suckler herd.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will give in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if he will make a statement. [13588]

Mr. Morley: The current best estimate of cost for resolving the computer problem for each financial year is as follows:

	£
Expenditure incurred to date (1996–97)	354,000
Expenditure allocated for 1997–98	2,710,000
Expenditure estimated for 1998–99	4,514,000
Expenditure estimated for 1999–2000	1,813,000
Making a total of	9,391,000

Including Agencies, non-IT "embedded chip" aspects and possible replacement of scientific equipment, total final costs are expected to exceed £11 million.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies' costs are not included; all have been contacted and asked to progress required action.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13590]

Mr. Morley: Audits of all the Department's major business-critical systems are now complete. Although the scope of the overall millennium programme continues to widen, all residual audit activity (including that relating to non-IT "embedded chip" aspects and scientific equipment) will be completed by the end of 1997.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13589]

Mr. Morley: It is currently planned that funding for preventive and remedial action to resolve the computer millennium problem will be met from existing PES provision. The estimated costs are shown in the table in the reply given to the hon. Member today; current financial plans include coverage for these figures.

However, some aspects of the programme are still largely an unknown quantity. There is a likelihood, therefore, that some non-critical work may need to be deferred beyond the end-December 1998 target set by the Central IT Unit of the Cabinet Office, that additional funds may need to be sought, or a combination of both.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13587]

Mr. Morley: In compliance with the Government-wide target set by the Cabinet Office's Central IT Unit (CITU), MAFF has submitted an action plan, required by October 1997. The costed action plan will be analysed by CITU and the CCTA and the conclusions reported to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament. The plans will be exempted from disclosure under the Open Government Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13591]

Mr. Morley: The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated bodies. The Director of IT is in charge of the Department's overall Millennium Programme which consists of a number of parallel projects covering different aspects of the Department's computer systems and associated technical infrastructure. The Director (Estates) co-ordinates all aspects of a separate project which has been established to address 'non-IT' equipment containing embedded microprocessor chip technology.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13957]

Mr. Morley: The Department receives in excess of 10,000 letters a year from hon. Members. The figures for 1996 were published along with those of other Departments on 17 June 1997, *Official Report*, column *107–12*. So far this year, the Department has received about 6,000 letters, 77 per cent. of which have been replied to within our target of 15 working days.

Cattle Passports

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the average length of time taken to process cattle passport applications *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each of the west country offices of MAFF. [13944]

Mr. Rooker: The average processing time for cattle passport applications in England is six working days. The average processing time in each of the west country offices of MAFF is three days (Bristol) and eight days (Exeter).

Poultry (De-beaking)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to outlaw the de-beaking of poultry for non-veterinary reasons; and if he will make a statement. [13687]

Mr. Morley: The current welfare codes make it clear that beak trimming of poultry should be carried out only where necessary to avoid a worse welfare problem such as might be caused by outbreaks of cannibalism in laying hens. We are addressing through our research programme the need to develop commercial systems which can reliably meet the welfare needs of poultry without recourse to this procedure.

The results of these studies will be taken into account in any revisions to the welfare codes and when reviewing the need for further legislative controls.

Fur Farms

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action his Department has taken to improve the conditions of animals in the fur farms; and if he will make a statement. [13686]

Mr. Morley: We have already put in place improved arrangements for the monitoring of compliance with existing national legislation protecting the welfare of animals farmed for fur. Internationally we are participating actively in the review of the Council of Europe's recommendation with the aim of ensuring adoption of the highest possible standards consistent with scientific evidence and expert opinion.

Following completion of our recent consultation exercise, we are considering how best to take forward our proposals for ending fur farming in the United Kingdom as soon as practicable.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Official Hospitality

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the total expenditure on official hospitality by his Department in the current Session. [12583]

Angela Eagle: Total expenditure by my Department and its agencies for the previous parliamentary session, ending in July 1997 was £75,000.

Diesel Fuel Subsidies

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information his Department has collated concerning the subsidy policies of EU countries with regard to diesel fuel used by heavy goods vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [13037]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government collects information concerning taxation and subsidy policies of EU countries on diesel fuel used by heavy goods vehicles from a range of sources. These include the European Commission, other member states, the oil industry, and road haulage industry representatives. An important source of information is the EC Working Document, "vehicle Taxation in the European Union 1997", a copy of which is to be found in the House of Commons Library.

Rivers and Canals (Safety)

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure adequate provision of life-saving equipment near rivers and canals. [13328]

Angela Eagle: Provision of life saving equipment is governed by the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. This places a duty on operators of canals and waterways towards members of the public who may be affected by the way in which they carry out their work. The extent to which operators must safeguard the public depends upon the nature of the risks involved and the cost and effectiveness of possible precautions. Relevant factors include the costs of installing life saving equipment, the practicalities of maintaining and protecting it against vandalism and theft, and the availability of someone nearby to deploy it. British Waterways has set up a user safety programme to review the risk to any groups who use its canal network.

"Rural England" White Paper

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish the next annual update of the countryside White Paper, "Rural England". [13129]

Angela Eagle: We have no plans to publish an update of the commitments set out in the previous government's Rural White Paper "Rural England".

Jet-skis

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, transport and the Regions what

representations he has received urging greater control over jet-skis and similar powered water craft; and if he will make a statement. [13327]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Some 150 responses have been received to wide-ranging consultation exercises intended to establish views on possible improvements to the control of personal watercraft and other non-regulated pleasure vessels. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is in an excellent position to bring together those dealing with marine safety, harbours and coastal authorities to review means of improving safety. The responses are being analysed and recommendations are expected to be made to Ministers within the next few months.

Train Services

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of state for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list by train operating company for each of the last 12 months the *(a)* punctuality targets and *(b)* levels achieved. [13132]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is published in the Opraf bulletins, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Transport Services (Mill Hill Broadway)

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the transport service from Mill Hill broadway; and if he will make a statement. [13118]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have received one representation from the hon. Member, about a decision by Thameslink Trains in respect of a morning peak rail service, and one representation about the price of rail fares which relates to journey from Mill Hill Broadway. I have received no representations relating to bus services in the area.

I expect franchised train operators to alter service patterns over time to respond to demand, and to do this in the interests of their passengers. I understand that Thameslink Trains have made a change to the morning peak timetable in order better to accommodate the passengers expected at that time and to mitigate overcrowding. Thameslink have to meet the Franchising Director's standards in respect of overcrowding, and plan a timetable which complies with their passenger service requirement. Decisions about how they achieve this are a matter for them.

Sea Transport (Fuel)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which ships have been licensed for the sea transport of Mox fuel assemblies to *(a)* other European Union member states, *(b)* Japan and *(c)* other countries from the United Kingdom. [13749]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There is no requirement for United Kingdom ships to be licensed for this purpose. However, the International Maritime Organization has adopted the "Code for the safe Carriage of Irradiated Nuclear Fuel, Plutonium and High-Level Radioactive Wastes in Flasks on board ships"—INF code. United Kingdom companies involved in transporting MOX fuel assemblies by sea use ships complying with this code, irrespective of destination.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the level of Government revenue support grant allocated to each local education authority in each metropolitan and London authority for each child in secondary and primary school. [13872]

Mr. Raynsford: Revenue support grant is paid to authorities in support of their general revenues. It is not allocated for particular purposes. The total revenue support grant allocated to each education authority in metropolitan areas and London is shown in the table.

Table showing revenue support grant (RSG) for London and Metropolitan Authorities in 1997–98

Local authority	*RSG (£m)*
Greater London	
City of London	59.755
Camden	141.305
Greenwich	143.598
Hackney	180.699
Hammersmith and Fulham	94.795
Islington	142.351
Kensington and Chelsea	66.642
Lambeth	176.797
Lewisham	157.724
Southwark	176.612
Tower Hamlets	199.884
Wandsworth	129.395
Westminster	151.614
Barking and Dagenham	78.249
Barnet	101.958
Bexley	73.585
Brent	144.644
Bromley	77.609
Croydon	114.926
Ealing	127.934
Enfield	118.790
Haringey	137.723
Harrow	63.369
Havering	64.408
Hillingdon	85.037
Hounslow	102.656
Kingston upon Thames	37.496
Merton	53.036
Newham	192.196
Redbridge	94.657
Richmond upon Thames	27.506
Sutton	57.157
Waltham Forest	119.635
Greater Manchester	
Bolton	100.720
Bury	50.727
Manchester	268.020
Oldham	101.999
Rochdale	84.894
Salford	100.575
Stockport	63.835
Tameside	79.722
Trafford	69.735
Wigan	97.588
Merseyside	
Knowsley	87.136
Liverpool	263.399
Sefton	97.851

Table showing revenue support grant (RSG) for London and Metropolitan Authorities in 1997–98

Local authority	*RSG (£m)*
St. Helens	65.703
Wirral	124.227
South Yorkshire	
Barnsley	74.107
Doncaster	117.119
Rotherham	99.665
Sheffield	195.941
Tyne and Wear	
Gateshead	81.913
Newcastle upon tyne	123.810
North Tyneside	70.692
South Tyneside	67.806
Sunderland	126.001
West Midlands	
Birmingham	537.660
Coventry	124.904
Dudley	87.233
Sandwell	133.469
Solihull	52.074
Walsall	117.194
Wolverhampton	108.220
West Yorkshire	
Bradford	225.916
Calderdale	70.653
Kirklees	131.230
Leeds	259.101
Wakefield	105.616

Education Expenditure, Derbyshire

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money has been given to Derbyshire county council in respect of education for each year since the introduction of revenue support grant. [13754]

Mr. Raynsford: The table below shows the education SSA figures for Derbyshire county council, along with Derbyshire's share of the national total, since the introduction of revenue support grant in 1990–91.

Year	*Education SSA for Derbyshire (£ million)*	*Percentage of national total*
1990–91	271.798	1.84
1991–92	311.313	1.82
1992–93	329.858	1.80
1993–94[1]	296.017	1.79
1994–95[1]	302.673	1.80
1995–96[1]	302.839	1.78
1996–97[1]	319.922	1.80
1997–98[1,2]	236.431	1.33

[1] SSA figure is not comparable with that for the previous year as a result of changes to the Education SSA formula e.g. removal of further education in 1993–94 from local authority responsibility.
[2] SSA figure is much lower following reorganisation in Derbyshire on 1 April 1997. The total Education SSA of Derbyshire CC and the City of Derby is £320.622 million (1.80 per cent. of the national total).

Wood Dust and Formaldehyde

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the research centres whose work has been evaluated by his Department in respect of research into *(a)* exposure to fine wood dust and *(b)* exposure to formaldehyde particles; what contact his Department has had with them; and what contact is planned in the future. [13866]

Angela Eagle: Comprehensive reviews of the international scientific literature were undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and considered by the Health and Safety Commission when advising on the setting of Maximum Exposure Limits for formaldehyde and softwood dusts under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations.

Studies have been carried out on formaldehyde for HSE by the Medical Research Council toxicology unit. HSE has also commissioned work on wood dust with the Health and Safety Laboratory. Future contact will depend on the nature of the new research commissioned and the findings that emerge.

Studies on non-occupational exposure have been carried out for my Department by the Medical Research Council's Institute for Environment and Health and by the Building Research Establishment, where long term studies are continuing. My Department will maintain contact with these research organisations.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the safety exposure limit, in parts per million, for formaldehyde emissions set by *(a)* the Health and Safety Executive and *(b)* other EU member states; and what international figures his Department has evaluated. [13865]

Angela Eagle: Formaldehyde has a maximum exposure limit (MEL) of two parts per million for an eight-hour time weighted average and for a 15-minute reference period under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH).

The occupational exposure limits for other EU member states and worldwide, where information is available, is in the table below. Under COSHH, employers are required to control exposures to formaldehyde to a level as low as is reasonably practicable and in any case below the MEL. It is therefore misleading to compare the numerical value of the MEL with limits in other countries, where limits have different definitions and applications.

Occupational exposure limits and guidelines for formaldehyde

Country or region	*Year*	*Concentration (mg/m³)*	*(ppm)*	*Interpretation*
Australia	1991	1.5	1.2	TWA; probable human carcinogen, sensitizer STEL
		3	2.5	
Austria	1982	1.20	1.00	TWA
Brazil	1978	2.30	1.90	TWA

Occupational exposure limits and guidelines for formaldehyde

Country or region	*Year*	*Concentration (mg/m³)*	*(ppm)*	*Interpretation*
Belgium	1991	1.2	1	TWA; probable human carcinogen
		2.5	2	STEL
Bulgaria	1984	1.00	0.80	TWA
Chile	1983	2.40	2.00	Ceiling
China	1982	3.00	2.50	TWA
Czech Republic	1991	0.5	0.4	TWA
		1	0.8	STEL
Denmark	1991	0.40	0.30	STEL; suspected carcinogen
Egypt	1959	6.20	5.00	TWA
Finland	1993	1.30	1.00	STEL, 15 min; significant absorption through skin
France	1991	3.00	2.50	STEL
Germany	1993	0.60	0.50	TWA; suspected carcinogenic potential; local irritant; sinsitizer
Hungary	1991	0.60	0.50	Ceiling; probable human carcinogen; irritant; sensitizer
India	1983	3.00	2.50	Ceiling
Indonesia	1978	6.00	5.00	Ceiling
Italy	1978	1.20	1.00	TWA
Japan	1991	0.61	0.50	TWA; suspected carcinogenic potential
Mexico	1983	3.00	2.50	TWA
Netherlands	1986	1.5	1.2	TWA
		3	2.5	Ceiling, 15 min
Norway	1990	0.6	0.5	TWA; allergen; suspected carcinogen
		1.2	1	Ceiling
Poland	1991	2.00	1.60	TWA
Romania	1975	4.00	3.00	MAX
Russian Federation	1991	0.50	0.40	STEL; significant absorption through skin; allergen
Sweden	1991	0.6	0.5	TWA; sensitizer
		1.2	1	Ceiling
Switzerland	1991	0.6	0.5	TWA; sensitizer
		1.2	1	Ceiling
Taiwan	1981	6.00	5.00	TWA; significant absorption through skin;
United Kingdom	1992	2.5	2	TWA; maximum exposure limit
		2.5	2	STEL, 15 min
USA				
ACGIH[1]	1993	0.37	0.3	Ceiling; suspected human carcinogen
		0.02	0.01	TWA; potential human carcinogen
NIOSH[2]	1992	0.12	0.1	Ceiling, 15 min
		0.9	0.75	TWA
OSHA[3]	1993	2.5	2.0	STEL

Key

[1] ACGIH: American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists—This is a non statutory body and the limits they prescribe are only a recommendation.

[2] NIOSH: National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health: A research institute whose limits are only advisory.

[3] OSHA: Occupational Safety and Health Administration: The statutory agency whose limits apply by law.

MEL: Maximum exposure limit. MELs have a particular status under COSHH. Under the Regulations, there is a duty to control exposure to substances with a MEL to a level as low as is reasonably practicable, and in any case below the MEL. This duty to reduce exposures thus does not stop once the MEL level has been achieved, but continues until all that is reasonably practicable has been done. This special status of MELs means that it is misleading simply to compare the numerical value of a MEL with a limit that applies in another country, where limits have different definitions and applications.

TWA: Time weighted average. Both the long-term and the short-term exposure limits are expressed as airborne concentrations averaged over a specified period of time. The period for the long-term limit is usually eight hours; the short-term exposure limit (STEL) in the UK is 15 minutes but may be different elsewhere.

Fibreboard

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the health risks associated with medium density fibreboard. [13867]

Angela Eagle: The Health and Safety Executive is conducting a literature review into the health effects of medium density fibreboard (MDF). My Department has commissioned the Medical Research Council's Institute for Environment and Health to carry out a preliminary assessment of the potential risks from the domestic use of MDF. Both those studies complement earlier extensive research and reviews on the possible health risks to which MDF could give rise. Machining of MDF can result in exposure to formaldehyde and wood dust.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the health risks associated with medium density fibreboard; and if he will publish these. [13868]

Angela Eagle: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has recently received many enquiries about the use of medium density fibreboard from employers, employees, the self-employed, members of the public, trade associations, trade unions and the press.

Two representations have also been received by HSE, one from an individual and another from a trade union. Such representations are normally treated in confidence

and HSE will disclose them only with the prior consent of those who made them. These will, however, be taken into account in any future action that may be proposed.

Local Authority Housing

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many local authority homes have been transferred since the inception of the stock transfer policy; what capital receipts have been received as a result of the stock transfer policy; if he will make a statement on the impact of stock transfer policy since 1988; and how much private finance has been attracted to the stock transfer policy. [13977]

Mr. Raynsford: Since 1988, 58 local authorities have completed 63 large scale voluntary transfers of all or part of their housing stock. These transfers have led to the transfer of over 252,000 dwellings, many of the tenants have benefited as a result of increased investment in their homes. So far, transfers have generated over £2.4 billion in capital receipts and raised over £4 billion in private finance for the acquisition, repair and maintenance, and management of the properties.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of *(a)* the capital repair backlog to council housing in each London borough and *(b)* the capital spending approved for the current year. [13495]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 3 November 1997]*: Authorities' estimates of the cost of the capital work required to their housing stock on 1 April 1996 and the allocations made to local authorities in London for the current financial year under the housing improvement programme are listed in the table.

£ thousands

Column 1 *Estimated need for capital work to council housing in London*	*Column 2* *Total capital work required at 1 April 1996*	*Column 3* *Housing annual capital guideline 1997–98*
Barking and Dagenham	[1]130,848	3,944
Barnet	37,553	3,704
Bexley	24,226	1,485
Brent	49,013	8,002
Bromley	[2]—	1,329
Camden	[3]—	9,924
City of London	18,164	342
Croydon	92,385	7,118
Ealing	70,642	5,689
Enfield	46,241	3,266
Greenwich	99,069	8,459
Hackney	495,000	12,451
Hammersmith and Fulham	78,457	7,325
Haringey	38,962	8,692
Harrow	40,981	1,613
Havering	91,394	2,144
Hillingdon	[1]75,750	4,431
Hounslow	74,383	3,879
Islington	216,768	9,255
Kensington and Chelsea	35,029	5,519
Kingston upon Thames	21,999	1,570
Lambeth	938,443	12,308
Lewisham	164,744	10,086
Merton	21,523	2,322
Newham	207,562	10,394
Redbridge	23,993	2,335
Richmond upon Thames	91,742	2,059
Southwark	[3]—	11,540
Sutton	[1]60,155	2,058
Tower Hamlets	162,605	8,608
Waltham Forest	158,080	5,435
Wandsworth	77,980	7,429
Westminster	77,377	9,619

Local housing authorities are required to submit returns from which the data in column 2 is collected. Local authorities use different methods to produce their estimates. The figures in column 3 are net of allocations for renewal of private sector stock and for disabled facilities grants.

[1] Indicates that authorities were unable to provide precise information, but they were able to provide their best estimates of the need for capital work to their stock.

[2] Indicates that authorities have transferred their entire council housing stock to a registered social landlord and are no longer required to submit the return from which this data is collected.

[3] Indicates that authorities were unable to supply an estimate of the need for capital work to their stock.

The Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill provides the legislative framework for the Capital Receipts Initiative, under which the Government expects to provide additional resources to support local authorities' capital expenditure on housing. The Government plans in the current financial year to make available £174 million under the Initiative to local authorities in England.

Local authority housing benefits from resources provided under other programmes such as the single regeneration budget challenge fund and the estates renewal challenge fund. Local authorities can also use their own resources to support capital expenditure on housing.

Bus Companies

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many national bus companies and municipal bus undertakings were privatised; and how many are still owned by the first owners following privatisation. [13712]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The 72 subsidiaries of the National Bus Company and the 10 companies in the Scottish Bus Group were privatised; 31 municipal bus companies have been sold by the local authorities concerned.

There is no requirement to report to this Department subsequent changes of ownership, which are a matter for the commercial market and, where relevant, the competition authorities.

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what decisions were taken at the International Atomic Energy Agency annual general conference held in September in regard to assessment of the adequacy of existing IAEA regulations covering the transport of plutonium and high-level radioactive waste. [13699]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The general conference requested the IAEA to prepare, for its board of governors, a report on legally binding and non-binding international instruments and regulations concerning the safe transport of radioactive materials and their implementation.

Nursery Vouchers

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to ensure that no local authority will be financially disadvantaged as a result of the scrapping of nursery vouchers. [13898]

Mr. Raynsford: The combined effect of the revenue support grant allocations and specific grants to be given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will ensure that all authorities are treated fairly, following the abolition of the scheme for nursery vouchers.

Paper Pulp Waste

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the guidelines for controlling the tipping of paper pulp waste from paper manufacture on farmland, upland and moors. [13691]

Angela Eagle: The previous Government's response to the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's Nineteenth Report on the Sustainable Use of Soil—CO428, January 1997—stated in paragraph 28 that the Water Research Centre and ADAS had been commissioned to develop further the criteria that determine in what circumstances the spreading on land of particular wastes benefit agriculture or result in ecological improvement; and that it would issue for public consultation good practice guidance reflecting the outcome of that research.

The Government plans to fulfil these commitments on receipt from the Environment Agency of the results of the research project. The original research project has been extended by the Environment Agency and is now expected to be completed by the end of March 1998.

Music (Sound Levels)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list those regulations governing the level of sound played in clubs where music is played; [13706]

(2) what assessment he has made of measures to encourage voluntary limitation of exposure to high decibel noise levels in clubs where music is played; [13708]

(3) what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the long-term effects of unprotected exposure to high levels of sound in clubs where music is played; [13707]

(4) what plans he has to extend existing legislation on noise safety at work to clubs where music is played. [13709]

Angela Eagle: Risks from noise exposure to people who work in clubs are covered by the Noise at Work Regulations 1989, while the health and safety of members of the public who attend clubs is governed by the general requirements of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. There are no plans to change this legislation in relation to clubs.

The licensing of clubs where music is played is the responsibility of the relevant licensing authority. It is for them to attach to licences such conditions as they consider necessary to protect the interests of both those attending the venue and those living nearby.

There has been substantial worldwide research on the effects of noise exposure on hearing, including work commissioned over many years by the Health and Safety Executive. In particular, the Health and Safety Executive published in 1985 a review by the Medical Research Council Institute of Hearing Research of the literature on damage to hearing arising from leisure noise, including noise in discotheques.

There has been no assessment of measures to encourage the voluntary limitation of exposure to high decibel noise levels in clubs where music is played.

Solar Panels

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is considering to increase the installation of solar panels in domestic property and public buildings; and what part he expects this to play in meeting renewable energy targets. [14290]

Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend the Minister of Science, Energy and Industry announced a review of new and renewable energy policy on 6 June, including consideration of what would be necessary and practicable to achieve 10 per cent. of the UK's electricity needs from renewables by the year 2010. The Government's support for solar panels will be considered in the context of this review. It is hoped that solar energy will be able to make a worthwhile contribution to UK power needs. However, currently the installation of photovoltaics in the UK is not cost-effective compared with other power generation options.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the number of representations he has received concerning regional development agencies. [14243]

Mr. Caborn: We have received around 1,500 responses to the issues paper on regional development agencies which we published on 11 June.

A1 Red Route (Accidents)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the accident rates on the A1 red route for each of the last four years. [13990]

Ms Glenda Jackson: For the section of the A1 red route from Stirling Corner to its junction with Pentonville Road the accident rates (in injury accidents per 100 million vehicle kilometres) are:

1993: 90
1994: 98
1995: 99
1996: 88

Zoo Directive

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to support the EU zoo directive; and if he will make a statement. [13683]

Angela Eagle: The Government supports efforts to improve zoo standards throughout the Community, which are long overdue. We believe that a directive would be the most effective way to achieve this. In deciding whether to pursue a directive in the Environment Council, we will need to consider whether it would attract sufficient support from other member states to secure its early adoption. We are discussing this with other member states as part of the groundwork for the forthcoming UK Presidency. If a directive is unattainable, the main alternative is to finalise a Council recommendation on zoos, which would be a significant step forward.

Hedgerows

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department has taken to protect hedgerows; and if he will make a statement. [13682]

Angela Eagle: Regulations for the protection of important hedgerows in England and Wales came into force on 1 June 1997. They control the removal of such hedgerows through a system of prior notification to the local planning authority. Although an important first step, we have instigated a review to consider how the regulations might be strengthened so that they give better protection for hedgerows. The review is being undertaken by a group which includes the statutory agencies, local authorities and the main farming and conservation bodies. It has been asked to report its recommendations by the end of December 1997.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to take steps to bring the height of hedges under planning law; and if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the height of hedges. [13945]

Angela Eagle: We have no plans to bring the height of hedges under planning law, but are considering whether there could be a case for some form of Government intervention in what, in general, are disputes between neighbours.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13561]

Angela Eagle: The Minister responsbile is the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hull, East (Mr. Prescott).

Each central directorate in DETR, executive agency and individual public body is responsible for ensuring compliance for the systems under its control. The Head of DETR's information technology services division has overall responsibility for co-ordinating the central Department's millennium computer compliance.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if he will make a statement. [13558]

Angela Eagle: The figures are provided in the following table:

	Latest estimate of total cost (£)	*Expenditure incurred to date (£)*	*Expenditure planned for 1997–98 (£)*	*1998–1999 (£)*	*1999–2000 (£)*
DETR (a)	3 million	0.2 million	1 million	1.5 million	0.5 million
Executive agencies[1]	15.5 million	0.095 million	2.2 million	13.3 million	
Other public bodies (b)	375 thousand	25 thousand	70 thousand	210 thousand	95 thousand

[1] For Highways Agency (HA) the Latest Estimate of Total Cost is £15 million, mainly the cost of traffic control systems and the like. HA has not been able to break down Expenditure Planned between 1998–1999 and 1999–2000.

Figures are currently not available for:

(a) Government Offices (GOs).

(b) London Transport (LT). The Chairman of LT has been asked to write to you on this matter.

London Regional Passengers Committee (LRPC)

Northern Lighthouse Board (Scotland and IOM).

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13557]

Angela Eagle: The costed action plans will be analysed by the central IT unit (CITU) and the CCTA and the conclusions reported to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13560]

Angela Eagle: In DETR, auditing was completed in October 1997.

In the Government offices for the regions, scoping of systems is being finalised and audits will follow.

In the executive agencies, half had completed their audits in the first half of 1997. Some agencies have conducted audits in two stages with a high level audit already complete and a second more detailed investigation either under way or planned for early 1998.

In the other public bodies, auditing has been completed in a minority, is under way in others, and, in all cases, is planned to be completed by mid 1998.

Mr Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13559]

Angela Eagle: The cost of preventive and remedial action on year 2000 will be met from existing PES provision.

Traffic Speed (Central London)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish his Department's estimates of traffic speed in central London for each of the past 10 years; and if he will give the estimate for the current year so far. [13989]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Published estimates of average traffic speeds (mph) in central London since 1968 are as follows:

	Morning peak	*Daytime off-peak*	*Evening peak*
1968	12.7	12.1	11.8
1971	12.9	12.6	12.7
1974	14.2	12.9	13.2
1977	12.3	12.6	11.9
1980	12.1	11.6	12.2
1983	11.8	11.9	11.5
1986	11.5	11.0	11.0
1990	10.3	10.6	10.3
1994	10.9	10.9	10.8

Morning peak: 7.45 am–9.15 am
Daytime off-peak: 10.00 am–4.00 pm
Evening peak: 4.45 pm–6.15 pm

Speed surveys in central, inner and outer London are conducted on a rotating basis, with each of these areas surveyed every three to four years. Data from the recently completed 1997 central survey are currently being validated and the survey results will be available later this year.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13949]

Angela Eagle: My Department seeks to answer letters from all hon. Members within 15 working days. As indicated by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in his reply to the hon. Member for Walsall, North, (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column 5, it has been customary for the Government to publish annual statistics showing Departments' and agencies' performance against their targets for reply to ministerial correspondence. The 1996 figures were published on 17 June 1997, *Official Report*, columns *107-12*.

Genetically Modified Maize

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will support the stance of Austria and Luxembourg on GM maize at the article 21 Committee meeting on 5 November; and if he will make a statement. [13689]

Angela Eagle: I am considering the UK's position and I will write to the hon. Gentleman once we have reached a conclusion.

White Rock Business Park, Paignton

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the result of the inquiry into the proposed White Rock Business Park, Paignton. [13245]

Mr. Caborn: As the hon. Member will now be aware, my letter of 29 October 1997 announced the Secretary of State's decision to refuse consent for a planning application by Sir Robert McAlpine Ltd for a business park at White Rock, Paignton.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has issued concerning the erection of telecommunications masts. [14543]

Mr. Caborn: Current planning policy guidance on telecommunication development is set out in planning policy guidance note 8 (PPG8 revised December 1992). That guidance reflects the importance attached to keeping to a minimum the number of telecommunications masts, and of sites for such installations. At paragraph 27, the PPG states that the sharing of masts will help to achieve this aim, where such sharing is practicable, as will the use of existing buildings to site new antennas. Telecommunications operators, licensed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984, are required by their licence conditions to take all reasonable steps to investigate the possibility of mast sharing. We already advise local planning authorities in the PPG that they may reasonably expect applicants for planning permission for large masts to show evidence that they have explored the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure.

It will henceforth be our policy to extend this guidance to the development of smaller masts, particularly those which are permitted under Part 24 of Schedule 2 to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995. Where an operator seeks a prior approval determination for a mast under that Order, clear evidence should be presented to the local planning authority that the operator has investigated carefully the siting of antennas on existing buildings or other structures, including masts. This is a further factor to consider alongside the sitting factors set out in appendix E to Department of the Environment circular 9/95. If the evidence regarding the consideration of such alternative

sites is not considered satisfactory, the planning authority, or the Secretary of State on appeal, may be justified in refusing approval to the mast's siting.

Operators will be assisted in exploring alternatives to new mast development by the register of mast sites maintained by the Radiocommunications Agency. Operators and local planning authorities can now access that information which should help in the consideration of alternative sites that have already been cleared for radio transmission purposes.

SCOTLAND

Health Living

12. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State what discussions he has had with the Greater Glasgow health board and other bodies in Glasgow on healthy living initiatives. [12049]

Mr. Galbraith: My right hon. friend has had no discussions with the Greater Glasgow Health Board or other bodies in Glasgow in healthy living initiatives. However, within the context of the Glasgow Healthy Cities Partnership, which provides a focus for community-based health promotion action within the East End of Glasgow, he is aware of a number of initiatives such as the Possil Stress Centre and I have myself visited the Centre for Women's Health and Eastbank Health Promotion Centre. These are all initiatives which I commend.

The hon. Member's record of campaigning against drugs is well known and he is to be commended for it. I was pleased to receive a proposal from COSLA to provide funding for two years for the appointment of a drug misuse co-ordinator. I am pleased to announce that the Government supports this proposal and I have asked officials to discuss the arrangements with COSLA in order to bring it about.

Criminal Cases Review Authority

13. **Mr. Mullin:** To ask the Secretary of State when he expects to establish a criminal cases review authority; and if he will make a statement. [12051]

Mr. McLeish: My right hon. Friend is aiming to have the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission in operation by 1 April 1999.

Fisheries (Quota Hopping)

14. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State when he last met European Fisheries Ministers to discuss the problem of quota hopping in Scottish waters. [12052]

Mr. Chisholm: My noble Friend, the Minister for Fisheries at The Scottish Office attended a meeting of the Council of European Fisheries Ministers on 30 October. Quota hopping was not on the agenda and was not discussed. Fisheries Departments are continuing to develop proposals to tackle this issue, in consultation with industry and the Commission, following the exchange of letters between the Prime Minister and the Commission President in June.

Devolution

15. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the additional costs to public funds which would stem from the devolution proposals. [12053]

Mr. McLeish: The costs of the devolution proposals will be met from within existing public expenditure provision.

Dearing and Garrick Reports

16. **Mr. Welsh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many submissions he received in response to his Department's consultation on the Dearing and Garrick reports. [12054]

Mr. Wilson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received 46 submissions in response to his Department's consultation on the Dearing and Garrick reports.

Scotch Whisky Association

17. **Mr. Alasdair Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the Scotch Whisky Association to discuss the future development of the industry in Scotland. [12055]

Mr. Wilson: I and my right hon. Friend are in regular informal contact with The Scotch Whisky Association. In addition my right hon. Friend is due to meet the Association on 21 November.

Health Boards

18. **Miss Begg**: To ask the Secretary of State when he next plans to meet the chairmen of the health boards in Scotland to discuss the reduction of bureaucracy. [12056]

Mr. Galbraith: I meet Chairmen of Health Boards regularly to discuss matters of current interest including the reduction of bureaucracy.

New Prisons

19. **Mr. Clifton-Brown**: To ask the Secretary of State what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about the use of the private finance initiative to finance new prisons. [12057]

Mr. McLeish: Discussions on this issue are still taking place between officials, including whether the use of private finance would offer value for money where custodial services were provided by the public sector. It is as yet too early to predict the outcome of this work.

Nursery Education

21. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the future availability of nursery education combined with day care. [12059]

Mr. Wilson: Our first priority is to offer pre-school education to all children in their pre-school year, as we undertook in the Manifesto and I shall be issuing a major consultation paper on pre-school education later in the autumn. We shall move as soon as practicable thereafter to consider associated daycare needs, as well as the extension of pre-school education to younger children.

Agriculture

22. **Mr. Paice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he next plans to discuss Scottish agriculture with his European Union counterparts. [12060]

Mr. Chisholm: My noble Friend the Minister with responsibility for Agriculture, the Environment and Fisheries has recently met both Commissioner Fischler and the Finnish Agriculture Minister to discuss Scottish agriculture. He also attended the October Agriculture Council. He will undertake further discussions and attend further meetings of the Agriculture Council as appropriate.

Referendum

23. **Mr. Flight:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received from Scots not currently resident in Scotland who were excluded from voting in the recent referendum. [12061]

Mr. McLeish: Around 100 representations have been received in writing together with a number of telephone enquiries seeking clarification about eligibility to vote.

Eligibility to vote in the referendum was determined by residency in Scotland. This reflected the fact that the Scottish Parliament will mainly affect people resident in Scotland.

Eligibility to vote was debated at length during the passage of the Referendums (Scotland and Wales) Bill earlier this year.

Class Sizes

24. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State when he expects to meet his target for class sizes of 30 pupils. [12062]

Mr. Wilson: Our intention is to achieve class sizes of 30 pupils or fewer in the first three years of primary school by the end of this Parliament.

Funding

25. **Mrs. May:** To ask the Secretary of State what discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Treasury regarding the size of the Scottish block. [12063]

Mr. Dewar: The size of the Scottish block is set for this year and next by the published expenditure plans and the July Budget announcements. The figures for subsequent years will depend on the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review in comparable English departments, which will feed into the block through the normal operation of the Barnett formula.

Forestry Commission

26. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State what are his plans for the Forestry Commission after Scottish devolution with particular reference to its responsibilities outside Scotland. [12064]

Mr. Chisholm: After devolution, the functions of the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales, in relation to forestry, will be transferred to the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly respectively. The Commission will, however, continue to be the Government Department with responsibility for forestry throughout Britain.

Caledonian MacBrayne

27. **Mrs. Ray Michie:** To ask the Secretary of State what plans he has to meet the managing director of Caledonian MacBrayne to discuss its ferry services. [12065]

Mr. Chisholm: My right hon. Friend met with the Managing Director of Caledonian MacBrayne on 1 August, and I met with the Chairman and previous Managing Director on 24 June. Neither I nor my right hon. Friend are planning to have a further meeting with the company's Managing Director at the present time. However, Scottish Office officials maintain frequent contact with the company's executive directors in connection with all aspects of Caledonian MacBrayne's business activities.

Health Service

28. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on his planned increased in health expenditure in Scotland for 1998–99. [12066]

Mr. Galbraith: Net expenditure in Scotland in 1998–99 is planned to be £4,581 million, which is an increase of £205 million or 4.7 per cent. over 1997–98 planned expenditure.

Residential and Nursing Homes

29. **Mr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to modify the regulations governing the registration and inspection of residential and nursing homes for the elderly. [12067]

Mr. Galbraith: The Scottish Office issued guidance to Health Boards and interested parties on 8 July this year on national core standards for the registration, operation and inspection of nursing homes. Following consultation, guidance will be issued soon to local authorities on the registration and inspection of residential care homes. Legislation on the regulation and inspection of residential and nursing home care and domiciliary care will follow when a suitable opportunity presents.

Degrees Course Tuition Fees

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish the annual tuition fees for a four-year degree course at universities in Scotland from September 1998 for students from *(a)* Scotland, *(b)* England and Wales and *(c)* EU countries. [13363]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The tuition fees which will apply to new students entering higher education in session 1998–99 are expected to be £1,000 and will be increased in line with inflation for subsequent years. New entrants in session 1997–98, existing students and those with a confirmed place by 1 August 1997 for 1998 will not be affected. For Scottish and EU students undertaking an Honours degree course at a Scottish university, which is a year longer than comparable courses elsewhere in the UK, The Scottish Office will waive the student's tuition fee in the final year and pay the fee to the institutions directly. Some students will be exempt altogether from making a contribution toward tuition fees throughout their higher education,

dependent on family circumstances. Further details will be made available in a leaflet, a copy of which will be placed in the Library of the House of Commons.

Health Education

Mr. Maclennan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what are the findings of the project funded jointly by his Department and the Health Education Board for Scotland to formulate the planning and provision of health education, including drug education, in Scottish teacher education institutions; and if he will make a statement. [13219]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The project referred to is not a research project. Its purpose was to make it easier for teacher educators and their students to acquire the relevant knowledge and insights to deliver health education in schools. Health education and promotion are central to the curriculum and ethos of primary, secondary and special schools in Scotland. Our new teachers must, therefore, be well prepared for their responsibilities in teaching their pupils about health and in encouraging them to develop healthy styles of living. The project has been under way since April 1996 and will be completed in April 1998. From the start, it has been a co-operative venture involving staff from each of the teacher education institutions (TEIs), and representatives from the Health Education Board for Scotland (HEBS), the General Teaching Council and the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID). The materials developed are to be made available to each of the TEIs to be adapted to fit their own courses. The materials, which are based on existing good practice in health education, will be relevant to students preparing to work with all children and young people of primary and secondary school age.

Scottish Parliament

20. **Mr. Gerald Howarth**: To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on the proposed powers of the Scottish Parliament in relation to European Union matters. [12058]

Mr. McLeish: The Government's proposals for involving the Scottish Parliament in relations with the European Union are set out in Chapter 5 of the White Paper, "Scotland's Parliament".

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on progress in choosing a site for the Scottish Parliament. [14674]

Mr. McLeish: We will select a site for the new Scottish Parliament as soon as possible, in the light of the best available information. This information must include independent costings of building construction or conversion projects on the possible sites. My Department has today commissioned design feasibility studies, an independent costing exercise and a transport and environmental impact assessment.

Page and Park Architects of Glasgow will look at how best to fit the needs of the Scottish Parliament into and around St. Andrews House on Calton Hill. Benson and Forsyth Architects, will look at how an appropriate building could best be placed on the site at Leith. RMJM (Scotland) will consider the design of a building for the Haymarket site.

The Glasgow office of quantity surveyors and cost consultants, Davis Langdon and Everest, is being asked to prepare comparative costings on the basis of the design feasibility studies.

Scott, Wilson, Kirkpatrick and Partners of Glasgow have also been commissioned to carry out a transport and environmental impact assessment on the sites under consideration.

The firms concerned have been asked to complete their work by mid-December. The total cost of the various studies is estimated to be about £250,000. This is a small fraction of the estimated cost of the building and will help the Government to reach a much better-informed view on the suitability of the possible sites.

Health Trust Deficits

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the *(a)* actual deficits and *(b)* projected deficits of each health trust as a percentage of their budgets for the last three years. [14273]

Mr. Galbraith: In 1994–95, one Trust reported a retained deficit as a result of a loss on disposal of fixed assets. In 1995–96, two Trusts reported retained deficits, which were technical in nature, as a result of a loss on disposal of fixed assets. In 1996–97, three Trusts reported retained deficits. Fife Healthcare experienced a deficit of £1.9 million as a result of a funding gap and the Victoria Infirmary's deficit of £6 million was caused by a combination of loss on disposal of fixed assets of £4.2 million and £1.8 million due to financial difficulties. One other Trust had a deficit which was technical in nature as a result of loss on disposal of fixed assets.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13595]

Mr. Dewar: My Department and associated agencies completed audits for Year 2000 computer compliance purposes on 8 October 1997. Responsibility for ensuring millennium compliance in other public bodies rests with the bodies themselves.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13592]

Mr. Dewar: The Scottish Office has sent an updated report on the computer millennium problems to the Central Computing and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA). Reports from all Departments will be analysed by the Central Information Technology Unit and the CCTA. The conclusions will be reported to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will give in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if he will make a statement; [13593]

(2) if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13594]

Mr. Dewar: It is not possible at this stage to predict accurately the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem across my Department, its Agencies and other public bodies. However it is expected that the cost of Year 2000 preventative and remedial action will be met within existing planned financial provision.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13596]

Mr. Dewar: I intend to retain overall responsibility for millennium computer compliance matters within my Department. The Director of Telecommunications is responsible for the compliance programme within The Scottish Office. Responsibility for ensuring millennium compliance in other public bodies rests with the bodies themselves.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Medical Students

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students applied for admission to medical schools this autumn, and how many were admitted; how many of those admitted, achieved three A grades at A level; how many had lower grades; and how many students with three A grades failed to secure a place. [13310]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is not held centrally or is not yet available. Information on applications received up to May 16 by subject were released by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in their press notice in June 1997. Fuller information on applicants by subject together with information on acceptances by subject and entry qualifications will be published by UCAS in their annual report in spring 1998. These figures will not, however, analyses the entry qualifications held by applicants who were not accepted.

Employment Service

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what assessment he has made of *(a)* the effectiveness of the Employment Service's preferred supplier system for administering contracts with third-party suppliers and *(b)* the reaction of the agencies which deal with young people to the administrative processes involved; [13510]

(2) how much it cost the Employment Service on average to place a young person in work through a jobcentre in the last year for which figures are available; [13511]

(3) how many young people the Portsmouth jobcentre has placed in work through jobcentre notices in the latest 12-month period for which figures are available; [13512]

(4) what assessment he has made of the planning undertaken by Employment Service managers in each district in Hampshire in relation to delivery of the new deal. [13513]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the questions has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for replies to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 4 October 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question regarding the average cost of placing a young person into work. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive.

The Employment Service does not separately monitor the average cost of placing a young person into work. It is required, by its annual agreement with the Department for Education and Employment, to monitor and report the average cost of placing an unemployed person into work (regardless of age). The last year for which this figure is available is 1996–97, when the average cost was £234.

In addition to this, the Employment Service also monitors the average cost of placing a long term unemployed person into work (£431 in 1996–97) and the average cost of placing a person with a disability into work (£321 in 1996–97). Neither of these unit costs are analysed by age of client and there are, at present, no plans to do so.

I hope this is helpful.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 4 October 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning the effectiveness of the Employment Service preferred supplier system and the reaction of agencies who deal with young people to the administrative processes involved.

I am satisfied that the preferred supplier system being used by the Employment Service is effective in helping both it and potential contractors to make the best use of their resources. The Employment Service benefits from the ability to invite competitive tenders from a manageable number of organisations, while potential contractors benefit from knowing that their bid will be taken seriously.

This approach is being used for Employment Service programmes designed to help unemployed people of all ages to improve their prospects of finding work. The Employment Service, is not, however, operating a preferred supplier system for the New Deal initiative for young people aged 18–24.

Organisations have generally accepted the rationale behind the preferred supplier system in relation to established programmes, and I am not aware of any problems—either from agencies dealing with young people or from others—about the administrative processes involved. I would, of course, be happy to look into any specific issues of which you are aware.

I hope this is helpful.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 4 October 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question requesting information about young people placed into employment by Portsmouth Employment Service Jobcentre during the latest 12 month period. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The two Employment Service Jobcentres in Portsmouth—Portsmouth North and Portsmouth Central—placed 920 young people aged 16–24 into employment in the 12 months ending September 1997.

I hope this is helpful.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 4 October 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question relating to the planning undertaken by Employment Service managers in each district in Hampshire with respect to New Deal delivery.

All New Deal district plans are due to be assessed by regional assessment panels starting next week. These panels, which will include senior Employment Service management, Government Office Directors and senior employer and voluntary sector representatives, will assess plans against agreed criteria to establish whether they represent robust and realistic proposals to implement New Deal. Where necessary, the panel will require plans to be amended or, in extremis, recast to ensure that this is so.

Delivery planning for New Deal in all Employment Service districts has been subject to progress monitoring and reporting on a fortnightly basis since the end of August 1997. The latest fortnightly progress reports (for the period ending 20 October 1997) show that the Employment Service Hampshire districts of Mid-Hants, Portsmouth, Southampton and Guildford, which covers parts of Hampshire, are all on course to submit their delivery plans on time for regional assessment. All plans, once approved, will be published.

If you have any specific concerns my Director for London and the South East, Richard Foster (tel: 0171 211 4395), will be happy to discuss them with you.

I trust that this is helpful.

School Meals

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent on subsidising school meals in Derbyshire in each of the last 10 years. [14200]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected centrally in the form requested. The following table shows Derbyshire local education authority's total net expenditure on its school catering service from 1986–87 to 1995–96, the latest year for which data are available.

Derbyshire County Council school catering services—net expenditure

	Cash terms
Year	*£000s*
1986–87	12,432
1987–88	14,525
1988–89	15,759
1989–90	15,064
1990–91	15,312
1991–92	18,695
1992–93	18,319
1993–94	13,908
1994–95	13,456
1995–96	12,698

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much has been spent on subsidising school meals in each shire county over the last 10 years, arranging the counties in descending order of expenditure. [14199]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected centrally in the form requested. The following table shows in descending order each shire county's total net expenditure on its school catering service between 1986–87 and 1995–96, the latest year for which outturn figures are available.

School catering services total net expenditure from 1986–87 to 1995–96

	Cash terms
LEAs	*£000s*
Derbyshire	150,168
Lancashire	132,156
Humberside	129,490
Nottinghamshire[1]	99,096
Avon	95,627
Cleveland	92,944
Hampshire	88,751
Essex	71,106
Leicestershire	69,166
Devon	65,969
Cheshire	64,996
Staffordshire	64,356
Hertfordshire	63,476
Kent	61,902
Durham	59,873
Norfolk	50,028
Bedfordshire	42,253
East Sussex	40,523
Surrey	39,502
Cambridgeshire	38,877
Cumbria	35,797
North Yorkshire	35,724
Northamptonshire	33,530
Warwickshire	33,349
Oxfordshire	31,499
Wiltshire	31,430
Cornwall	30,757
West Sussex	28,525
Shropshire	28,345
Suffolk[2]	28,158
Somerset	26,848
Northumberland	24,798
Gloucestershire	23,083
Buckinghamshire	21,712
Berkshire[3]	17,734
Dorset	17,397
Hereford and Worcester	16,199
Lincolnshire	15,073
Isle of Wight	9,491

[1] Excludes net expenditure for 1991–92.
[2] Excludes net expenditure for 1989–90.
[3] Excludes net expenditure for 1987–88.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement; [13577]

(2) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if he will make a statement; [13578]

(3) if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000; [13579]

(4) when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement; [13580]

(5) which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13581]

Dr. Howells: My Department has assessed carefully and systematically the extent to which its processes and outputs would be vulnerable to disruption from the computer millennium problem. We have defined the scope of the problem and realistically assessed the risks; planned for the effective testing of solutions; initiated the preparation of contingency plans and are taking steps to strengthen contracts with suppliers. Compliance audits of the Department's IS/IT systems were completed in August 1997: those for the Employment Service were completed in September 1997. Steps have been taken to ensure that all of the agencies and non-departmental public bodies that are answerable to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment are adopting a comparably rigorous approach.

The estimated cost of securing full millennium compliance of DfEE's IS/IT is £4.55 million, of which £1.08 million will be spent in 1997–98 and the remainder in 1998–99. The current comparable estimate for the Employment Service is £23.15 million—£0.95 million in 1997–98, £20.7 million in 1998–99 and £1.5 million in 1999–2000. The cost of securing millennium compliance of embedded chips in the Department's building control and associated systems is estimated at £0.25 million, which will be spent in 1998–99. The necessary funding is being found from existing financial provision.

I am the Minister with overall responsibility for the Department's year 2000 compliance programme. The civil servant with overall responsibility in DfEE is Mr. Kenneth Jordan, the head of procurement and contracting who is also responsible for assessing the extent of the vulnerability to year 2000 problems in the key parts of the Department's supply chain. The civil servant with overall responsibility in the Employment Service is Mr. Ray Phillips, the director of policy and process design.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13948]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to a similar question from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column 5.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Six-month Entry Visas

Mr. Hunter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many six-month entry visas to the United Kingdom were granted by the entry clearance section in Bangkok in each of the last two years for which statistics are available; and how many applications were rejected. [12574]

Mr. Fatchett: The majority of visas for the UK are valid for presentation at a port within six months of date of issue. It is then for an immigration officer to determine the period of stay. The total number of visas including settlement visas issued in Bangkok was as follows:

1995: 50,433

1996: 50,696

Of these, the total number of non-settlement visas issued and refused was:

	1995	*1996*
Granted	49,863	50,253
Refused	830	1,138

The number of multiple entry visas valid for presentation for six months granted and refused in Bangkok was:

	1995	*1996*
Granted	7,830	8,927
Refused	72	116

Cuba

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on Britain's relations with Cuba. [12763]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have normal diplomatic relations with Cuba and support normal trade relations in civil goods and services. UK firms are encouraged to exploit the growing civil market opportunities which arise as Cuba undergoes a process of economic liberalisation. We continue to urge the Cuban Government to reach an early settlement of outstanding debt to ECGD and UK firms.

We and EU partners share the goal of a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba. We favour constructive engagement not isolation. The EU adopted a common position on Cuba on 2 December 1996, reaffirming the EU's commitment to promoting political, economic and human rights reform in Cuba. This was presented to the Cuban Government on 21 July and we look forward to furthering this dialogue.

Israeli Service Men

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will endeavour to locate the Israeli service men Zachary Baumel, Yehuda Katz, Zvi Feldman and Ron Arad, to obtain news of their welfare and to negotiate for their release from captivity. [13111]

Mr. Fatchett: Efforts to establish the fate of missing Israeli service men have been hindered by the lack of information about which organisations are holding them.

Nevertheless, we support all efforts to obtain information on their fate. This message was underlined when I took part in a satellite link-up with members of the Knesset in May to mark Ron Arad's birthday. I also raised the case when I visited Syria later that month.

We shall continue to raise the cases of these service men whenever the opportunity arises.

Immigration Correspondence

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what were the staffing levels of the migration and visa correspondence unit on 1 October *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997. [13998]

Mr. Fatchett: The answer is as follows:

(a) 13

(b) 12

(c) 12 permanent, four temporary.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will create a dedicated unit to deal with hon. Members' correspondence at the migration and visa correspondence unit. [14001]

Mr. Fatchett: The migration and visa correspondence unit's primary role is to deal with members' correspondence, which accounts for the greater part of its workload.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many complaints have been received about the level of service of the migration and visa correspondence unit in the last 12 months. [14002]

Mr. Fatchett: Our correspondence statistics are not broken down in a way that enables complaints to be identified separately. To provide the information requested would involve disproportionate cost.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the average time taken by the migration and visa correspondence unit to answer correspondence from an hon. Member. [14000]

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the average time between hon. Members writing on behalf of constituents in immigration and related cases and the reply being sent to the hon. Member. [13198]

Mr. Fatchett: As the result of a 35 per cent. increase in correspondence from Members since the general election the migration and visa correspondence unit has been unable to maintain its normal target of a reply within 15 working days. The average time for non-urgent correspondence is currently five weeks. Extra staff have been deployed with the aim of eliminating delays.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many letters were received by the migration and visa correspondence unit in each month of 1997. [13999]

Mr. Fatchett: The migration and visa correspondence unit has received the following number of letters from Members:

	Number
January	556
February	517
March	459
April	600
May	427
June	982
July	1,278
August	1,158
September	956
Total	6,933

In addition, 4,461 letters were received during the same period from other correspondents.

Congo

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will investigate human rights abuses relating to the disappearance of refugees from the camps south of Kisangari in rebel-held Congo-Zaire; and if he will make a statement. [13976]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We fully support the mission of the UN human rights inquiry team in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The inquiry team will investigate alleged human rights violations between 1993 and 1997—including the disappearance of refugees from the Kisingani area—throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have been held with the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo; what diplomatic relations the United Kingdom has with that country; and if he will make a statement. [13501]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* We enjoy normal diplomatic relations with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. HM ambassador and diplomatic staff in Kinshasa are in regular contact with all levels of the Government, and I met President Kabila during the EU ministerial troika visit to Kinshasa on 4–5 August. We have made clear that our future relationship with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, including the resumption of development assistance, is conditional upon respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

NATO Expansion

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the *(a)* civilian and *(b)* political elements of NATO expansion. [13917]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: At the Madrid summit in July NATO member states invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to begin accession discussions. We expect these to be completed in time for my right hon. Friend the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to be able to sign accession protocols at the North Atlantic Council on 16 December. After ratification of the three Protocols by all 16 NATO allies the three new members would enter the political, military and civil structures of the alliance. NATO's existing political consultations, civil emergency planning, economic, scientific and environmental activities will all involve the new member states.

UN Disarmament Debate

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what matters in regard to the retention of nuclear weapons by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council have been raised by nations addressing the United Nations First Committee on Disarmament and International Security in its annual debate. [13748]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Questions of nuclear disarmament were widely discussed in the First Committee's general debate. Progress by the US and Russia on reductions of their nuclear forces through the bilateral START negotiations was widely welcomed. Other issues relevant to the retention of nuclear weapons by the nuclear weapon states included the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty, a fissile material cut-off treaty, the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the threat or use of nuclear weapons, nuclear weapon free zones and security assurances.

Kenya and Uganda

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the current human rights situations in Kenya and Uganda. [13927]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We strongly believe that the Governments of Kenya and Uganda should meet their obligations under the international human rights instruments to which they are parties. I raised the human rights situation in Kenya, including the concerns set out by Amnesty International, with President Moi and Attorney General Wako when I visited Nairobi in June. In Uganda we have condemned atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army against the Acholi people in the north. We continue to make clear to the Ugandan Government that operations by their security forces must conform with international human rights standards.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the United Kingdom's European partners on the repeal of article 223 of the treaty of Rome. [13857]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There have been no such discussions.

Sea Level Rises

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what decisions were taken at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Scotland to assist small low-lying island states threatened by sea level rises. [13751]

Mr. Fatchett: Small island developing states are particularly vulnerable to rise in sea level as a result of global warming. Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh discussed the threat of climate change and called for developed countries to pursue significant reductions in their greenhouse gas emissions at December's Kyoto negotiations. They also agreed to initiate action in the international community to strengthen assistance to small states which suffer the effects of natural disasters.

Arms Exports

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the United Kingdom's European partners on the development of a common policy on arms exports. [13858]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have discussed the possibility of a code of conduct informally with a number of partners, and will formally take forward an initiative during our Presidency of the European Union in early 1998.

Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his Department's policy towards the expansion of the OSCE. [13918]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are committed to strengthening the OSCE's role in conflict prevention, including through support for the work of its Missions in the field. Together with EU partners we are also contributing actively to the development within the OSCE of a security model for Europe.

United Nations Day

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what initiatives Her Majesty's Government took in *(a)* the United Kingdom, *(b)* British overseas territories, *(c)* the United Nations in New York and *(d)* the United Nations in Geneva to mark United Nations Day on 24 October. [13747]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Staff at the United Nations in New York and Geneva attended special commemorative events. We took no specific initiatives to mark United Nations Day.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral statement of 28 October, *Official Report*, columns 700–02, if Her Majesty's Government have had sight of that part of the Lockerbie evidence held by the United States. [13934.]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* As my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Scottish Office, told the hon. Member on 30 October, *Official Report*, column *876*, there has been very full co-operation throughout the investigation between the Scottish and United States authorities. Appropriate arrangements have been made for the sharing of information and evidence.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral statement of 28 October, *Official Report*, column 700–02, what evidence he has now evaluated to establish that, with the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Cohen, the majority of US relatives do not want a trial outside the US or Scotland. [13936]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* Our embassy in Washington is in touch with a number of American Lockerbie relatives, some of whom represent groups of other families. I understand that most favour trial in Scotland or the United States, in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions.

"Victims of Flight 103"—the group which represents the largest number of American relatives, shares this view.

The US Administration, on the basis of its contacts with a wide range of the families, also believes that the overwhelming majority are opposed to a trial outside the United States or Scotland.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral statement of 28 October, *Official Report*, columns 700–02, for what reasons it is not possible to mount a prosecution of Libyan suspects for the Lockerbie bombing in Scotland without the co-operation of the US authorities. [13935]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The UK and US authorities have co-operated closely throughout this investigation. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary told the House on 28 October, *Official Report*, column 700–01, it would not be possible to mount a prosecution without the co-operation of the US authorities who hold part of the evidence.

Human Rights

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions have been held with the Government of Ghana concerning human rights abuses; and if he will make a statement on United Kingdom relations with Ghana. [13665]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* We have not held any recent discussions with the Government of Ghana concerning human rights. We continue to monitor the human rights situation in Ghana closely, and raise specific issues with the Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice.

We have excellent bilateral relations with Ghana.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have been held with the Government of Sri Lanka concerning the conflict with Tamil groups; what mediation services have been offered; and if he will make a statement. [13667]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* We have regular discussions with the Sri Lankan Government on a range of issues, including their efforts to find a resolution to the ethnic conflict. We have said publicly that we stand ready to help in those efforts if both sides ask us to play a role.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made by the Government to the Government of Algeria concerning human rights abuses; and if he will make a statement. [13488]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* I continue to be seriously concerned about the security situation in Algeria. I condemn the violence unreservedly and call on those responsible to end the appalling atrocities which have been inflicted on innocent civilians for much too long. We urge the Algerian Government and all interested parties to find early solutions to this major internal problem. I was concerned to learn about reports of fraud in the local and municipal elections held on 23 October 1997 and hope that the Algerian Government will continue to make active progress in its programme of democratisation.

Individual Cases (Ministerial Meetings)

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many requests since 1 May he and his Ministers have received from hon. Members to discuss individual cases; and how many of these have been granted. [13878]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* I regret that we do not keep records that would enable us to answer this question. Requests from hon. Members to discuss individual cases are not declined.

European Court of Justice

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations were made by Her Majesty's Government after 1 May concerning reform of the European Court of Justice. [14411]

Mr. Doug Henderson: None. There was little support for such reform in the intergovernmental conference.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he will list the additional areas in which the European Court of Justice will gain jurisdiction as a result of the Amsterdam treaty; [14408]

(2) if he will make a statement on the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice over the third pillar of the European Union following the Amsterdam treaty. [14409]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) on 18 July, *Official Report*, column *360*.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13950]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answer that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column *5*.

In 1996 Foreign and Commonwealth Office Ministers replied to 10,674 letters from hon. Members, of which 94 per cent. were replied to within the target of 10 working days.

Social Chapter

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what percentage of the powers available under the social chapter of the treaty of European Union are subject to qualified majority voting. [14406]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The agreement on social policy allows for legislation to be adopted in 10 different areas. Five of these are subject to qualified majority voting.

Amsterdam Treaty

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the additional powers gained by the European Parliament as a result of the treaty of Amsterdam. [14412]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) on 18 July, *Official Report*, column *361*.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what additional legislation will be required in the United Kingdom to implement the provisions of article 141 of the treaty establishing the European Community, as amended by the treaty of Amsterdam, relating to equal pay for work of equal value; and if he will make a statement. [14310]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The amendments to the EC Treaty provided for in the treaty of Amsterdam will be implemented in the UK by the European Communities (Amendment) Bill.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has consulted other departments in assessing the legal implications of article 137 of the treaty establishing the European Community as amended by the Amsterdam treaty as concerns increased litigation in the areas so covered. [14270]

Mr. Doug Henderson: All Government departments with an interest were involved in preparing our negotiating position for Amsterdam.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what proposals are currently being prepared at European Union level to assist harmonisation in the fields of the promotion of *(a)* employment *(b)* improved living conditions and *(c)* improved working conditions, under article 136 of the treaty establishing the European Community, as amended by the treaty of Amsterdam. [14312]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No proposals are planned under article 136.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if decisions to impose sanctions under the common foreign and security policy of the European Union under the provisions of the Amsterdam treaty will be taken by qualified majority voting. [14410]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Under the Amsterdam treaty unanimity will remain the general rule for decision making in the common foreign and security policy, including for the imposition of any sanctions. However, the treaty also provides for the Council to act by qualified

majority when taking decisions based on a common strategy, or when implementing a joint action or common position. But any member state may block such a decision for important and stated reasons of national policy.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the status of the agreement on quota hopping reached at the Amsterdam summit. [14407]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In an exchange of letters at Amsterdam between my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the President of the European Commission, the Commission set out measures we can take to address the problem of quota hopping. The Commission confirmed that the UK can require UK-flagged vessels to demonstrate that their activities contribute substantial economic benefits for populations dependent on fishing and related industries in the UK. Fisheries departments are currently working up a package of measures based on the Commission guidance in consultation with the fishing industry.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the institutions referred to as management and labour in section 4 of article 137 and section 1 of article 139 of the treaty establishing the European Community as amended by the Amsterdam treaty, include institutions other than the Social Partners; and if he will make a statement. [14311]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Social partners is simply another way of describing representatives of management and labour.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has held with other departments on article 140 of the treaty establishing the European Community, as amended by the treaty of Amsterdam; what reservations were expressed; what study is currently being undertaken on projects to be undertaken under this article; and if he will make a statement. [14309]

Mr. Doug Henderson: All Government Departments with an interest were involved in preparing our negotiating position for Amsterdam and were content that we should agree article 140 (ex article 118c). Article 140 is not yet in force and no projects under it are planned.

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what cost-benefit analysis he has undertaken of programmes planned to be introduced under article 137 of the treaty establishing the European Community, as amended by the Amsterdam treaty. [14313]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Article 137 is not yet in force. But it is likely that measures under discussion under article 2 of the agreement on social policy when the Amsterdam treaty came into force would subsequently come under article 137. The costs and benefits of any such proposals would be assessed in the normal way.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13571]

Mr. Fatchett: Responsibility within this department for millennium compliance rests with myself and Roy Dibble, director general services.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [13568]

Mr. Fatchett: The cost of resolving the computer millennium problems in this Department is estimated at £4,100,000.

(i) expenditure incurred already is £193,000.

Annual planned spends are:

(ii) 1997–98: £750,000

(iii) 1998–99: £1,907,000

(iv) 1999–2000: £1,250,000

These figures could be reduced by up to £1,050,000 if no slippage occurs in existing strategic Information Systems infrastructure replacement plans.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13569]

Mr. Fatchett: We expect to achieve millennium compliance by the year 2000. Provision has been made for £2,857,000 for resolution of millennium problems within this Department. There is an additional contingency provision of £1,050,000 to cover the costs of remedial action to existing systems should the planned replacement of strategic systems incur any slippage. Both these sums will be met from the existing PES provision.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13567]

Mr. Fatchett: The costed action plans will be analysed by the Central Information Technology Unit (CITU) and the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) and the conclusions reported to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament. The plans will be exempted from disclosure under the open government code of practice on access to Government information, which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However, once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public. Information systems department submitted this Department's plans to CCTA on 17 October 1997.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department,

its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13570]

Mr. Fatchett: We completed an initial scoping study in June 1996, followed by a detailed study of the problem and its likely impact on this Department's core IT systems in August 1996. Since then analysis and remedial work on individual systems is being carried out in priority order on those systems for which millennium-compliant replacement is not already planned.

European Movement

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the total of public funds given to the European Movement in the most recent annual period for which figures are available; and what record is kept of payments to this organisation by the EU. [14213]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No Government funding has been made available to the European Movement in the current financial year. The European Commission does not publish a list of grants made to organisations providing information about Europe.

Bull Fighting

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will seek to meet representatives from the Spanish Government to encourage a ban on bull fighting; and if he will make a statement. [13685]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There are no plans to do so. We are committed to higher standards of animal welfare and will continue to work to achieve improved welfare protection at the EU level.

Australia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations his Department has made to the Government of Australia concerning proposed changes in aboriginal land title. [13994]

Mr. Fatchett: None.

India

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received urging him to apologise to the Indian people for the Amritsar massacre of 1918; and if he will make a statement. [13985]

Mr. Fatchett: There were a number of representations over the 1919 massacre, whether addressed to the Queen or Her Majesty's Government, in advance of Her Majesty's successful visit to Amritsar where the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh laid wreaths at Jallianwala Bagh.

France

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the meeting between his Department and the French Minister for European Affairs on 16 September. [14269]

Mr. Doug Henderson: On 16 September I met Pierre Moscovici, French Minister for European Affairs, during his visit to London. We discussed a range of European issues, including employment and enlargement in particular. I outlined our approach to the Employment Agenda and in particular the need to address the real problems of competitiveness and employability facing workers in European countries and to make this agenda attractive to citizens. We discussed preparations for the British-French Summit and Luxembourg Special European Council, both of which focus on employment policies. British and French views on enlargement and handling the European conference are similar. I stressed the importance of related issues such as reform of the common agricultural policy. I also raised the urgent need for a solution to the problem of illegal immigrants arriving via Eurostar.

Western Sahara

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations have been made at the United Nations concerning the proposed referendum on the future of the Western Sahara. [13997]

Mr. Fatchett: We have not made any representations at the United Nations concerning the proposed referendum in Western Sahara.

As a permanent member of the Security Council, and a member of the Friends of Western Sahara Group at the United Nations, we are directly involved with the international efforts to secure a lasting solution to the dispute over Western Sahara led by Mr. Baker. We have assisted, and will continue to support, the UN Secretary General and his Personal Envoy.

Kenya

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has held with the Government of Kenya concerning human rights abuses; and if he will make a statement. [13986]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) on 29 October, *Official Report*, column *824*.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Housing Improvement Grants

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications have been made to each regional division of the Housing Executive for each type of improvement grant; if she will indicate the length of time taken to process a grant application; and how long an applicant has to wait within each division for an inspection of property from the time of submission of an application form. [12554]

Mr. Murphy: This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The chief executive has advised me that the information requested is as follows, in respect of the period April to September 1997:

Region	*Number of preliminary inquiries received*[1]	*Average time for inspection—weeks*[2]	*Average time taken to process—weeks*[3]
Belfast	1,296	16	29
North East	850	28	29
South East	596	52	25
South	616	79	31
West	1,062	72	32

[1] The grants scheme requires the completion of a preliminary inquiry form. This is not an application, but is the "trigger" for an inspection of a property. Figures are not held by grant type.

[2] These figures represent the average time lapse between receipt of a preliminary enquiry and the date of inspection and only relate to the main "improvement" (i.e. renovation and replacement grants).

[3] These figures represent the average time lapse between the date of inspection and the date of approval for a full application for renovation or replacement grant.

The executive regularly reviews performance standards across its regions and has allocated additional resources to those regions where inspection times are particularly lengthy. Present performance is influenced by the backlog of applications which exists due to unprecedented demand for grants. It is anticipated that performance standards will improve as the benefit of additional resources takes effect. In addition, performance on renovation and replacement grants has been severely effected by the diversion of financial and personnel resources to the administration of repairs grants. These grants are mandatory, on foot of public health notices issued by local councils. Recent years have seen an unprecedented demand for this grant. Very recent legislative changes have led to a significant reduction in repair grant applications. There are already signs of small improvements in performance on other grants as the impact of this reduction takes effect.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) if she will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if she expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000; [13619]

(2) what is her latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which she is responsible; if she will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–00; and if she will make a statement; [13618]

(3) when her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if she will make a statement; [13620]

(4) if she will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if she will make a statement; [13617]

(5) which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in her Department and its associated public bodies. [13621]

Mr. Murphy: The cost of preventative and remedial action on Year 2000 will be met from existing PES provision. Action is planned to be completed before the year 2000.

The Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments had completed their system audits by early summer 1997 and are working to a local target date for submission of detail costed plans to the department of finance and personnel of 1 December 1997. Until these plans have been completed and collated it will not be possible to provide estimates of the costs likely to be involved.

Following analysis of the plans, Parliament will be informed of the outcome. The plans will be exempted from disclosure under the open government code of practice on access to Government information, which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However, once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public.

The Northern Ireland Office, Northern Ireland Departments, their agencies and other public bodies are responsible for ensuring millennium compliance for their own systems. The role of the department of finance and personnel is to provide advice and guidance under my direction. In this I am supported by the head of central IT unit within my Department.

HEALTH

Beta Interferon

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of prescribing beta interferon in each year since 1995 for each health authority. [13475]

Mr. Milburn: The available information is shown in the table. Comparable information for the complete 1997 year is not yet available. In order not to disclose information that may relate to an individual patient, information is only provided where 50 items or more have been dispensed. In no health authority in 1995 were 50 or more items dispensed.

The cost of prescribing beta interferon in hospitals is not available.

Net ingredient cost of prescriptions for beta interferon dispensed in the community

£000

	1995	*1996*
Berkshire	—	80
West Surrey	—	113
East Surrey	—	52
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	—	69
England	132	681

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many complaints his Department has received concerning the prescribing of beta interferon in each year since 1995. [13473]

Mr. Milburn: The Department of Health has received a number of representations about the prescribing of beta interferon, by letter and telephone. However, a central record of all such representations is not available.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the cost of beta interferon to the NHS in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997. [13808]

Mr. Milburn: The available information is shown in the table. Comparable information for the complete 1997 year is not yet available.

	1995	*1996*
England	132	681

The cost of prescribing beta interferon in hospitals is not available.

Roads (A12–A134 Junction)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the cost, including consultancy fees, of preparing plans for a proposed junction between the A12 and A134. [13306]

Mr. Milburn: The junction onto the A12 is part of a phased development for a new major road in North Colchester. Costs for producing the master plan for the road have been borne by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and the local authority for the area. Generally the costs of preparing the design for the junction itself has been the responsibility of the local authority. Information relating to the precise costs should be sought from the local authority.

Health Service Management Savings

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of additional patients the NHS will be able to treat due to management savings between 1 October 1997 and 31 March 1998. [13323]

Mr. Milburn: We set targets to reduce National Health Service management costs in 1997–98 by £100 million. Many of the savings achieved will already have been re-invested locally in direct patient care services. In addition, we have directly invested £10 million of the savings from deferring the 8th wave of general practitioner fundholders in improving breast cancer services, so that all women have speedy access to high quality diagnosis and treatment. We have also invested a further £5 million in strengthening paediatric intensive care services in readiness for the winter. It is estimated that at the start of this financial year health authorities were planning to purchase an additional 66,000 elective episodes—cases treated from waiting lists—in 1997–98 when compared with 1996–97.

Public Health Laboratory Service, Colindale

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement consequent on the recent visit of the Minister for Public Health to the public health laboratory service, Colindale. [13121]

Ms Jowell: I am pleased to note that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) also visited the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) at their headquarters in Colindale, and trust that he was as impressed as I was by my visit in June. The PHLS has provided microbiological and epidemiological services for fifty years and plays a key role in protecting the population from communicable disease threats. We expect this key role to continue to be central to the Government's emphasis on public health.

Emergency and Elective Treatments

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* emergency patients the NHS plans to receive and *(b)* elective finished consultant episodes the NHS plans to complete between October 1997 and 31 March 1998. [13321]

Mr. Milburn: Plans are only collected on an annual basis. The table gives the 1997–98 plans for elective finished consultant episodes (FCEs) and non-elective finished consultant episodes and first consultant episodes. Non-elective first finished consultant episodes have been collected for the first time this year as a measure of the number of non-elective hospital spells.

Elective and non-elective FCEs: 1997–98 plans, in thousands

Regional office	*Elective plan–FCEs*	*Non-elective plan–FCEs*	*Non-elective plan–first FCEs*
Northern and Yorkshire	735	629	533
Trent	507	521	455
Anglia and Oxford	481	422	346
North Thames	648	540	469
South Thames	582	527	455
South and West	733	562	485
West Midlands	499	469	432
North West	845	710	589
England	5,030	4,380	3,764

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many emergency patients the NHS planned to receive between 1 October 1996 and 31 March 1997; and how many were received. [13319]

Mr. Milburn: Plans are only collected on an annual basis. The table gives the non elective activity plans for 1996–97 as a whole. The activity is the total number of finished consultant episodes.

Non-elective FCEs: plans in 1996–97 and activity in last two quarters of 1996–97, in thousands

Regional office	*Plan 1996–97*	*Activity 1 October 1996 to 31 March 1997*
Northern and Yorkshire	597	322
Trent	492	263
Anglia and Oxford	397	215
North Thames	524	278
South Thames	504	268
South and West	540	284
West Midlands	449	238
North West	665	353
England	4,168	2,221

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many elective finished consultant episodes the NHS planned for between 1 October 1996 and 31 March 1997; and how many took place. [13320]

Mr. Milburn: Plans are only collected on an annual basis. The table gives the elective activity plans for 1996–97 as a whole and the elective activity that took place during the period October 1996 to March 1997. The activity is the total number of elective finished consultant episodes and is expressed in thousands.

Regional office	*Plan 1996–97*	*Activity, 1 October 1996 to 31 March 1997*
Northern and Yorkshire	734	356
Trent	498	249
Anglia and Oxford	474	243
North Thames	631	324
South Thames	633	295
South and West	707	350
West Midlands	503	251
North West	819	412
England	4,999	2,480

GP Fundholding

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made of the total financial surpluses held by general practitioner fundholders on 1 April 1997. [13175]

Mr. Milburn: Information on the balance of general practitioner fundholder savings on 1 April 1997 is not yet available. I therefore refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 26 June 1997 at column *620*.

Health Authority Budgets

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the likely pressures on health authority budgets arising from the High Court ruling in R *v.* North Derbyshire health authority ex parte Fisher. [13474]

Mr. Milburn: We do not expect the ruling in the recent judicial review to have any impact on health authority budgets. The ruling requires health authorities, in deciding how best to allocate their available resources to meet the health needs of their population, to have regard to Departmental guidance. It does not require them to give any particular degree of priority to any particular treatment.

Crime Victims (Guidance)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to issue guidance to social services and NHS staff on procedures they should adopt in relation to the advice and support they should offer to people with learning difficulties within their care who have been a victim of a crime. [13383]

Mr. Boateng: We have no plans to do so at present. However, we will be considering what, if any, guidance should be issued in the light of a substantial programme of projects the Department of Health has funded on the issue of abuse of people with learning disabilities, a forthcoming consultation seminar on abuse of vulnerable adults in residential services and the work of the Home Office's inter-departmental group on vulnerable and intimidated witnesses. The group is seeking to identify measures that will help vulnerable people including people with learning disabilities who come in contact with the criminal justice system as a result of being a victim of, or a witness to, a crime.

Dental Services

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many adults and children in Great Britain were registered with a dentist on 30 September. [13329]

Mr. Milburn: In England and Wales 20,558,282 adults and 7,804,254 child patients were registered with a General Dental Service dentist on 30 September 1997.

For Scotland the latest available data are for 1 September 1997 when 2,098,734 adults and 754,012 child patients were registered.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has funded into chronic fatigue syndrome; what plans he has to commission further research; and what steps have been taken to inform doctors of the results of such research. [13919]

Mr. Boateng: The main agency through which the Government supports medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council. The MRC is an independent body which receives its grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology, which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry. The Council currently supports one project grant in the area of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. This is being undertaken by Dr. R. K. Morriss at the University of Manchester and is entitled "The role of noradrenaline in the neuropsychological pathogenesis of the chronic fatigue syndrome". The total amount awarded is £37,000. The Council is always willing to consider new ideas for research and will consider applications on their scientific merits.

The Department of Health has also funded a research project through the National Health Service Research and Development programme called "Should GPs manage chronic fatigue syndrome? A controlled trial", the report of which is expected shortly. Comprehensive information is not available centrally on all expenditure in the NHS on research into chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis.

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the present research projects funded by the Government into the causes and effects of ME, indicating the Government's research objectives in this area. [13965]

Mr. Boateng: The main agency through which the Government supports medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council. The MRC is an independent body which receives its grant-in-aid from the Office of Science and Technology, which is part of the Department of Trade and Industry. The Council currently supports one project grant in the area of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. This is being undertaken by Dr. R. K. Morriss at the

University of Manchester and is entitled "The role of noradrenaline in the neuropsychological pathogenesis of the chronic fatigue syndrome".

The Department of Health is also funding a research project through the National Health Service Research and Development programme called "Should GPs manage chronic fatigue syndrome? A controlled trial", the report of which is expected shortly. Comprehensive information is not available centrally on all the activity in the NHS on research into chronic fatigue syndrome/Myalgic Encephalomyelitis.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the sixth annual report of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority to be published; and if he will announce changes in the membership of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. [14542]

Ms Jowell: We have received the report and copies have today been laid before both Houses of Parliament in accordance with the requirements of section 7(3) of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. Copies have also been placed in the Library.

I am pleased to announce the following appointments made on behalf of the United Kingdom Health Ministers:

Mrs. Ruth Deech, Principal of St Anne's College, Oxford, re-appointed as Chairman until 6 November 2000.

Mrs. Jane Denton, Nursing Director of the Multiple Births Foundation and currently a member of the HFEA, appointed as Deputy Chairman until 27 October 1998, when her existing term of membership ends.

Professor Allan Templeton, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of Aberdeen, re-appointed as a member until 6 November 2000.

Professor Andrew Grubb, Professor of Health Care Law, King's College, London, appointed as a member until 6 November 2000.

I am very grateful to Lady Brittan, CBE, Mrs Angela Mays and the right Rev. Richard Holloway who are retiring on 6 November having served with the Authority since its inception in 1990. I also wish to thank Professor Rory Nicol who has asked to leave the Authority on 6 November.

The new appointments and re-appointments have been made in accordance with guidance issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

Three vacancies remain, about which we shall make an announcement in due course.

Multiple Sclerosis

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to ensure uniformity of treatment for multiple sclerosis sufferers across the United Kingdom. [13785]

Mr. Boateng: We are keen to ensure a greater degree of equity in the availability of treatment for people with multiple sclerosis, wherever they may live. Existing guidance requires all health authorities to develop policies which allow the prescribing of beta interferon, in relation to alternative uses of available resources, in suitable cases.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients suffering from multiple sclerosis were offered beta interferon by each heath authority in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997. [13807]

Mr. Milburn: We do not know how many patients were offered beta-interferon, but the number of prescription items for beta-interferon products dispensed in the community in England is shown in the table. In order not to disclose information that may relate to an individual patient, information is only provided where 50 items or more have been dispensed. In no health authority in 1995 were 50 or more items dispensed.

Prescription items for beta-interferon dispensed in the community in England

	1995	*1996*
Berkshire	—	75
West Surrey	—	142
East Surrey	—	81
Ealing Hammersmith and Hounslow	—	85
England	182	806

Comparable data for 1997 are not yet available.

The cost of prescribing beta interferon in hospitals is not available.

Departmental Budget

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the total real level of his Department's budget, in 1995–96 prices, in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and if he will estimate what such figures were for (i) 1997–98 and (ii) 1998–99 following the November 1996 Budget on the basis of the estimates of the GDP deflator contained in the Budget. [13232]

Mr. Milburn: The figures requested for the Department's spending plans within the Control Total are as follows: *(a)* £33,306 million, *(b)* £33,516 million, (1) £33,422 million and (2) £33,174 million. (Source: Treasury).

Expenditure

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his latest estimate of expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* NHS trusts and *(c)* other health bodies for which he has responsibility, on tax advice; and if he will make a statement. [13236]

Mr. Milburn: For the expenditure on tax advice by the Department, I refer the hon. Member to the reply my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health has given him today. National Health Service trusts and other health bodies provide analyses of their expenditure to the department but expenditure on tax advice is not shown separately.

Tax Avoidance

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his policy on the purchase of tax avoidance advice by the NHS; what directives he has issued on the purchase of tax avoidance advice by the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [13237]

Mr. Milburn: Last month we agreed that an Executive Letter should be sent to all National Health Service bodies setting out the Government's policy on this. This will be issued shortly.

Health Trusts (Deficits)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* actual deficits *(b)* projected deficits of each health trust in England as a percentage of their budget for the last three years. [14272]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested has been placed in the Library. Percentages have been given with respect to the income or turnover of each trust.

Health Authorities (Deficits)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the *(a)* actual deficits and *(b)* projected deficits of each health authority in England as a percentage of their budget for their last three years. [14276]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested has been placed in the Library. Percentages have been given with respect to the income or turnover of each health authority.

Private Medicine (Tax Reliefs)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the effects on demand for NHS treatment of the decision to abolish the tax relief on private medical insurance payments; and if he will make a statement. [13239]

Mr. Milburn: We have made available substantial additional resources to the National Health Service, both this year and next, which dwarf any additional demand created by the abolition of tax relief on private medical insurance premiums.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement. [13602]

Ms Jowell: Year 2000 plans covering the Department of Health were sent to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) in October 1997. The plans and supporting documentation will be analyzed by the Central Information Technology Unit and the CCTA and their conclusions reported to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament of his findings. The plans are exempted from disclosure under the Open Government Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, prior to an announcement.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will give in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [13603]

Ms Jowell: Information on planned expenditure by the Department will be sent to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency as a part of the action plan requested by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and as such will become available once a statement on this activity has been made to Parliament.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13606]

Ms Jowell: The Minister responsible for ensuring Year 2000 compliance is my Noble Friend the Minister of State, Baroness Jay and the work programme within the departments is being coordinated by the head of the applications development and support who reports to a senior departmental information system steering committee on the Year 2000 issue.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of the systems; and if he will make a statement. [13605]

Ms Jowell: The Department and its Agencies have completed their millennium computer compliance audits, with the exception of National Health Service Estates who expect completion by 31 January 1998.

For each separate NHS organisation, by 31 December 1998, all critical systems should be ready and fully tested, or detailed plans made for coping with those systems or equipment that cannot be repaired or replaced in time. We will require that any trust or health authority which has not got its systems ready and fully tested should notify the Department by 31 December 1998.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if he expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13604]

Ms Jowell: The Department is committed to resolving any Year 2000 problems on business critical systems by the Central Information Technology Unit recommended deadline. The cost of preventative and remedial action will be met from existing financial provision.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13951]

Ms. Jowell: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column *5*.

Figures for 1997 are not yet available.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of trends in hospital waiting lists over the next six months; and if he will make a statement. [13233]

Mr. Milburn: Our predecessors left the National Health Service with rising waiting times and a record number of patients waiting to be treated. It will take time to turn around the situation we inherited. The £269 million redirected to the NHS in England for 1997–98 will help health authorities and trusts to begin to restrain the growth in waiting lists and times as will the £1 billion increase for next year announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has undertaken on the relationship between NHS funding and hospital waiting lists; if he will publish such research; and if he will make a statement. [13235]

Mr. Milburn: Waiting lists are influenced by a number of factors, of which funding is only one. New treatments are becoming available all the time and new techniques are being introduced which enable people to undergo surgery who previously could not have been treated. We are working with health authorities and trusts to ensure that the best possible use is made of the resources available to them and that more of each pound spent on the National Health Service goes on direct patient care. The £269 million we have re-directed to the NHS in England for 1997–98 and the £1 billion increase for next year announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July are significant steps towards fulfilling our commitment to shorten waiting lists.

NHS Capacity

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his assessment of the ability of the NHS to deal with seasonal demand pressures this winter. [13238]

Mr. Boateng: We have made clear that the first priority of health authorities and National Health Service trusts, above all other, is to make adequate provision for emergency care. Health authorities, NHS trusts and local authority social services departments around the country are working hard to prepare for this winter. The Government has made available an additional £269 million for the NHS in England in the current year to help in this task. In addition in 1998–99 there will be a 1.9 per cent. real terms increase in general revenue allocations to health authorities, the largest for five years.

Diabetic Pen Needles

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what factors are being considered in determining whether pen needles for insulin dependent diabetics should be available on prescription; [13240]

(2) what representations he has received about pen needles for the use of insulin dependent diabetics; and if he will make a statement. [13242]

Mr. Milburn: We have received representations from the British Diabetic Association and others which we are considering, taking all relevant factors into account.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Agency

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are her plans for the out-of-hours payment service operated by the Benefits Agency. [14018]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, The Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 3 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking about the plans for the out-of-hours payment service operated by the Benefits Agency.

In line with the Government's commitment to modernise the Social Security system a consultation exercise between officials from the Benefits Agency (BA) and other Departments on the future of the current Out of Hours Service has recently been undertaken.

As a result of those discussions there are no plans at present to change the way in which the current service is administered. BA offices will therefore continue to provide an Out of Hours Service.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Mortgage Interest Payments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations she has received about the level of the mortgage interest rate paid to those on benefits; and if she will make a statement. [13243]

Mr. Keith Bradley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave to the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on 30 October, *Official Report*, column *856*.

We have received 562 representations from hon. Members, members of the public and national organisations.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the guidelines for the minimum levels of income which absent parents should expect to live on following calculations by the CSA. [13735]

Mr. Keith Bradley: For those in work, child support assessments made under the maintenance formula ensure that an absent parent is generally left with at least 70 per cent. of his net income and at least £30 a week more than he would have if claiming income support. Most absent parents are left with significantly higher amounts, though lower figures may apply where, for example, an interim maintenance assessment has been imposed in an effort to secure the absent parent's co-operation or the absent parent is in arrears with his payments.

Absent parents who receive income support or income-based jobseeker's allowance are generally required to pay a standard weekly amount, currently £5.00, unless for example they are sick or disabled or have a dependent child living with them. This payment recognises that absent parents are important to their children and should normally be expected to contribute to their maintenance.

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if travel to work costs are taken into consideration by the CSA in making assessments of payments by an absent parent; and if she will make a statement. [13734]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Travel to work costs are taken into consideration under the standard maintenance formula. Where the straight line distance of journeys from home to work exceeds 150 miles per week an allowance of 10 pence per mile is made for each excess mile.

Parents may apply for a departure from the standard assessment where they face high travel to work costs of more than £15.00 per week. This gives the flexibility to take account of individual circumstances in the minority of cases where the formula assessment does not give a fair result.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if she will make a statement. [13612]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The costed action plan produced by the Department of Social Security was submitted to Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency (CCTA) on 30 September 1997. This plan, together with the plans of other Government Departments, will be analysed by Central Information Technology Unit (CITU) and the CCTA and the conclusions reported to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who will then inform Parliament. The plans will be exempted from disclosure under the open government code of practice on access to Government information, which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. Once the announcement has been made the plans will be available.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if she will make a statement. [13615]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The year 2000 compliance audit of the Department's systems, comprising its agencies and other public bodies, was completed by 31 March 1997.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in her Department and its associated public bodies. [13616]

Mr. Keith Bradley: I have ministerial responsibility for the year 2000 compliance work and Mr. Ian Magee, the chief executive of the Information Technology Services Agency, is the civil servant accountable for this work on behalf of the Department of Social Security, reporting to the departmental board and the permanent secretary.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which she is responsible; if she will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if she will make a statement. [13613]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is in the table.

£000

	Total cost	*Cost to date*	*1997–98*[1]	*1998–99*	*1999–00*
Benefits Agency	7,326	533	2,574	4,181	571
Contributions Agency	3,107	87	708	1,974	335
Child Support Agency	3,442	42	1,744	1,656	42
Information Technology Services Agency	26,861	40	6,801	10,562	9,498
War Pensions Agency	279	22	32	242	5
Headquarters	3,469	211	94	2,456	919
ISBs/NDPB	261	14	91	170	—
Central Project costs	1,037	491	594	239	204
Departmental Totals	45,692	1,440	12,638	21,480	11,574

[1] Total expenditure for the year which includes seven months costs to date.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if she expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13614]

Mr. Keith Bradley: This work has been afforded the highest priority across the Department. Business Cases to secure the necessary funds from existing PES provision have been produced and a Corporate Business Case seeking approval to spend will be submitted to HM Treasury in November 1997.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations her Department has received on benefit payments to asylum seekers. [13992]

Mr. Keith Bradley: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) on 27 October, *Official Report*, columns *728–29*.

Reciprocal Pension Agreements

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to extend reciprocal pension agreements to other countries; and when she expects such arrangements to be made. [13946]

Mr. Denham: The Government has no plans to extend reciprocal pension agreements to other countries.

Mobility Allowance

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what assessment her Department is currently undertaking into the lower age limit for mobility allowance; [13241]

(2) what representations she has received regarding the upper and lower age limits for mobility allowance. [13244]

Mr. Denham: There have been 95 representations from hon. Members, members of the public and national organisations, since June 1997, of which 61 related to the rules about the upper age limit for the benefit as a whole.

The comprehensive spending reviews in this Department, which were announced in June, include those benefits paid to sick and disabled people. The reviews will include an examination of the entitlement rules to disability living allowance to ensure that help is provided to those people with greatest needs.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 5 November 1997

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Beard: To ask the Attorney-General what proposals there are to change the 1997–98 cash limit or running cost limit for the work of Her Majesty's Procurator-General and Treasury Solicitor. [14043]

The Attorney-General: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class VIII, vote 6 will be increased by £433,000 from £7,003,000 to £7,436,000. The running costs limit is also increased by £712,000 from £25,742,000 to £26,454,000. The increases reflect the increased demand for services, machinery of Government changes and a transfer of an end year flexibility amount from the Crown Prosecution Service to take account of the costs of the CPS review falling on the Legal Secretariat to the Law Officers. The increase in the cash limit will be charged to the Reserve and will therefore not be an addition to the planned total of public expenditure.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

British Railways Board

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has set the British Railways Board an external finance limit for 1997–98. [14922]

Dr. Strang: I have set the British Railways Board an external finance limit of £69.7 million for 1997–98.

Transport Council

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Transport Council held in Luxembourg on 9 October. [14923]

Dr. Strang: The Transport Council met in Luxembourg on 9 October. I represented the United Kingdom.

The Council opened with a session of structured dialogue with Transport Ministers of the applicant central European countries—CECs. A report by the Commission on the recent Pan-European conference in Helsinki was followed by discussion of issues relating to market access. Three areas for future work were identified: the need to strengthen co-operation between the Community and the CECs; developing the mobility of citizens; and the need to take account of all modes of transport in negotiations in market access.

The Council discussed air transport negotiations with the US. The Commission's view was that, although Community discussions with the US on regulatory issues had been useful, further progress would not be made unless market access was brought within the scope of the negotiations. The UK noted that success in its current bilateral negotiations with the US would bring benefits for passengers from the UK and the rest of the EU. The UK and other member states expressed doubts about the Commission's approach. The presidency concluded that there should be further work by the Commission, and a report back to the December Council.

The Council took note of the Commission's progress report on air transport negotiations with the CECs.

The Council debated a draft directive on airport charges. The debate focused on two aspects of the directive: the use of charges for cross-subsidy of smaller regional airports; and the variability of charges to reflect environmental considerations. The Council invited the Committee of Permanent Representatives to continue its examination of the proposal.

The Council reached unanimous political agreement on a directive on access to the occupation of road transport operator. This directive will raise the standards required of lorry, bus and coach operators in the Community.

The Council agreed conclusions urging greater emphasis on the public-private partnerships approach to Trans-European Network projects.

The Commission presented its White Paper on extension of the provisions of working time legislation to excluded sectors, including transport. It was noted that consultation with interested parties was still in progress. The UK, with some other member states, urged a case-by-case approach to the extension to transport, taking account of the needs of each form of transport.

The Commission presented the case for a Community-wide blood alcohol limit of 50 mg per 100 ml. The UK expressed its determination to further reduce alcohol-related roads deaths, and noted that it was important to consider other ways of reducing drink-drive accidents as well.

There was a discussion of weekend lorry bans in member states; the Commission undertook to produce draft legislation on this issue by the end of the year. The Commission also presented its draft regulation extending the Community's competition rules to air services to third countries.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies, on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13257]

Angela Eagle: For the Department and for non-departmental public bodies the information is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. For agencies the figures are: 1995–96 Nil, 1996–97 £16,562 and 1997–98 (spend to date) £3,525.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13258]

Angela Eagle: One agency of the Department has used tax advisers to enable it to fulfil its statutory tax obligations rather than for tax avoidance purposes.

Roads (Downland Design, Build, Finance and Operate Scheme)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what compensation payments are required to be made, and to whom, as a result of the decision not to proceed in July with the construction of the A27 Polegate bypass and associated works within the Weald and Downland DBFO scheme. [13776]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* We are currently considering whether the four consortia that submitted tenders for the Weald and Downland DBFO project should be compensated for their costs.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total cost to the Government of compensation in respect of the postponement of the Downland DBFO Scheme. [14204]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are currently considering whether the four consortia who submitted tenders for the Weald and Downland DBFO project should be compensated for their costs.

Ordnance Survey

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to change the 1997–98 cash limit and net running cost limit for the Ordnance Survey. [14400]

Mr. Raynsford: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary winter supplementary estimate for Ordnance Survey, the cash limit will be increased by a token of £1,000 from £6,759,000 to £6,760,000 and the net running cost limit increased from £3,025,000 to £3,026,000.

This supplementary estimate reflects an increase in running cost expenditure of £2,001,000 from £73,970,000 offset by an increase in appropriations in aid of £2,000,000 from £78,180,000 to £80,180,000.

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change his Department's cash limits and running cost limits for 1997–98. [14401]

Mr. Prescott: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, my Department's cash limits will change as follows:

(i) the cash limit for class V, vote 1—Highways Agency—will be increased by £10,229,000 from £1,562,329,000 to £1,572,558,000. The increase in the cash limit reflects the take-up of £11,979,000 capital end year flexibility amount as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *245–50*, offset by an inter-vote transfer from this vote to class V, vote 2 of £1,750,000 for the ongoing motorway tolling project.

(ii) the cash limit for class V, vote 2—Department of Transport: administration and transport services—will be increased by £3,625,000 from £158,075,000 to £161,700,000. The increase results from the take-up of £2,000,000 capital end year flexibility amount as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report* columns *245–50* and inter-vote transfers from class V, vote 1 of £1,750,000 and from class V, vote 5 of £85,000 for mobility unit expenditure to be re-classified as running costs, offset by inter-vote transfers from this vote to class V, vote 5 of £60,000 for priority routes in London and to class XIII, vote 2 of £150,000 for the Edinburgh City Car Club research project. Running cost provision for this vote increases by £85,000 from £86,436,000 to £86,521,000.

(iii) the cash limit for class V, vote 5—Roads and local transport—will be increased by £1,675,000 from £313,863,000 to £315,538,000. The increase reflects the take up of £2,100,000 structural funds end year flexibility amount as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report* columns *245–50* and an inter-vote transfer from class V, vote 2 of £60,000, offset by an inter-vote transfer from this vote to class V, vote 2 of £85,000 and a reduction in the provision for licence fee refunds to goods vehicle and public service vehicle operators and drivers of £400,000.

(iv) the cash limit for class V, vote 7—Passenger rail services—will be reduced by £51,000,000 from £1,516,385,000 to £1,465,385,000. The reduction reflects a £50,000,000 inter-vote transfer from this vote to class V, vote 3 for Metropolitan Railway Passenger Services Grant, and a £1,000,000 reduction in respect of reduced expenditure on consultants.

(v) the DoT/LACAP (Local Authority Capital) non-voted cash limit will be increased by £7,150,000 from £349,193,000 to £356,343,000, to fund works associated with the rebuilding of Manchester city centre comprising of improvements to the Inner Relief Road, the development of a bus strategy and traffic management scheme and improved routes for pedestrians. The increase of £7,150,000 will be met by a call on the Reserve.

As a consequence of the changes in (ii) above the gross running costs limit operating on class V, votes 1, 2, 4 and 6 will be increased by £85,000 from £373,274,000 to £373,359,000.

(vi) the cash limit for class VI, vote 1—housing and construction, England—covering sections A, D to G, I, J and L of that vote, will be decreased by £3,325.000 from £599,708,000 to £596,383,000. An increase in the cash limit of £220,000 is offset by a decrease of £3,545,000. The increase is to meet residual additional administration costs the Housing Corporation is expected to incur in respect of the loan portfolio sale, funded from sale receipts. The decrease results principally from a reduction of £2,935,000 in homelessness grants current expenditure provision to fund an increase in rough sleepers initiative capital allocations through the Housing Corporation, which falls outside the cash limit. Of the remaining reductions, Estates Renewal Challenge Fund provision will be reduced by £500,000 to support registered social landlords' housing costs arising from the need to house people displaced from Montserrat as a result of volcanic activity on the island, and a reduction of £110,000 results from a reclassification of extra receipts recovered from homelessness grants, so that voted provision takes account of those receipts and is adjusted accordingly. The DETR/HC (Housing Corporation) cash limit will consequently be increased by £3,435,000 from £673,050,000 to £676,485,000.

(vii) a new DETR/CRI (Capital Receipts Initiative) cash limit will be introduced, subject to the passage of legislation, to cover the Government's initiative to release additional resources to support local authority spending on housing and housing associated regeneration. The limit on expenditure is set initially at £174,270,000.

(viii) the cash limit for class VI, vote 2—regeneration and countryside and wildlife, England—will be increased by £36,116,000 from £1,480,168,000 to £1,516,284,000. An increase is required of £14,000,000 for the Urban Regeneration Agency (English Partnerships) to continue with works at Greenwich for the Millennium Exhibition and £7,230,000 for support for the regeneration of Manchester city centre; £8,000,000 for payments to be made for ERDF projects in advance of grant; £2,491,000 for the Teesside Development Corporation to meet a deficit as a result of judicial review; and £4,395,000 on three capital projects which had slipped from previous years. The increase will be met by a call on the Reserve of £17,991,000, the use of £10,125,000 end year flexibility amount as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report* columns *245–50*, offset in part by the surrender of £4,000,000 of receipts to the Exchequer and a transfer of £8,000,000 from the DOE/ERDF non-voted cash limit.

(ix) the DETR/ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) non-voted cash limit will be reduced by £8,000,000 from £146,332,000 to £138,332,000. This reflects gross payments to be made for ERDF projects in advance of European Community receipts. As a consequence of (viii) above, there will be increases to external financing limits for the Urban Development Corporations of £1,427,000 from £199,784,000 to £201,211,00; for the Urban Regeneration Agency (English Partnerships) of £46,000,000 from £204,779,000 to £250,779,000 and for the Housing Action Trusts of £512,000 from £88,688,000 to £89,200.00.

(x) the cash limit for class VI, vote 4—local government and planning, England—covering sections A to F of that vote, will be reduced by £321,000 from £30,987,957,000 to £30,987,636,000. This reflects savings on payments to meet the expenses of valuation tribunals in Section A (Valuation services), on grant in aid to the Local Government Residuary Body in Section B (Reorganisation of local government) and on the European Union Spatial Planning Initiative in Section D (Planning and minerals research). The saving will be used within vote 4, to cover residual payments of council tax transitional reduction grant in Section H (Council tax transitional reduction grant) and of special grant to authorities affected by the terrorist bombings of Docklands and Manchester and emergency financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme in section 1 (Other grants), which are outside the cash limit on the vote.

The overall increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Local Government Finance

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money has been given to Derbyshire county council and Derby city council in revenue support grant from central Government for 1997–98 [13753]

Mr. Raynsford: Derbyshire county council received £166.734 million and Derby city council received £84.507 million revenue support grant for 1997–98.

Rent Officer Service

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what decision has been made in relation to the future of the rent officer service; and how many responses were received during the consultation period. [13479]

Ms Armstrong: I announced on 7 August that I had concluded that there was a strong case for the creation of a Next Steps Agency for the Rent Officer Service in England. I said then that before taking a final decision I would be consulting interested parties, including the Local Government Association, the trades unions representing rent officers and their support staff, and other interested parties. That consultation is now complete, and I am grateful for the 63 responses I received from individuals and organisations. I am placing a summary of these in the Library.

There is general agreement that the current arrangements are unsatisfactory, but views differ on the solution. Many respondents favoured the Agency proposal, but support was also expressed for various alternative proposals. I have given very careful consideration to all the views which have been submitted, but have concluded that none of the alternative suggestions would tackle satisfactorily the inherent problems of the Service, which are caused by the unclear pattern of accountability and local inconsistencies of approach. I have therefore decided to proceed with the establishment of a Next Steps Agency for the Rent Officer Service in England.

My Department will now go ahead, in consultation with interested parties, to make preparations for establishing the Agency. It will be necessary to ensure that the implementation costs can be contained within the available public expenditure provision. For this reason, and because of the amount of detailed planning yet to be done, I cannot yet say when the Agency will become operational, but it will be as soon as practicable.

Waste Dumping at Sea

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the time scale for ending the dumping of wastes at sea. [13025]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

The United Kingdom is a contracting party to the Oslo convention for the prevention of marine pollution by dumping from ships and aircraft and its successor, the convention for the protection of the marine environment of the north-east Atlantic (the OSPAR convention) which is expected to come into force shortly. Under the OSPAR convention only the following may be considered for dumping.

dredged material

inert materials of natural origin, that is solid, chemically unprocessed geological material the chemical constituents of which are unlikely to be released into the marine environment;

sewage sludge until 31 December 1998;

fish waste from industrial fish processing operations; and

vessels and aircraft until, at the latest, 31 December 2004.

disused offshore installations and offshore pipelines.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

British Passports

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many passports were issued by the British embassy in Dublin in each of the last five years and how many were refused in each of those years specifying the most frequent reason for refusal. [13020]

Mr. Fatchett: The information is as follows:

	Passports issued	*Ineligible applications/refusals*
1993	4,835	12
1994	6,122	24
1995	5,236	17
1996	5,406	20
1997	5,068	11
Total to date	26,667	84

These figures do not include extensions, child additions or amendments. Entitlement to British passports is a matter of law. Passports are refused when the applicant is unable to prove identity or his or her claim to British nationality.

Belarus

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations Her Majesty's Government have made through diplomatic channels to the State of Belarus about the suspension of parliamentary democracy within that country. [13101]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We regularly make clear to the Belarus authorities our concerns over the constitutional and human rights situation in Belarus. Our ambassador in Minsk reiterated these concerns to Foreign Minister Antanovich at a meeting in September and officials from this Department made similar points to Deputy Foreign Minister Martynov in London in September.

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent contacts there have been between Her Majesty's Government and the state of Belarus. [13100]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Following the disputed constitutional referendum of November 1996, the EU General Affairs Council adopted Conclusions in February 1997, in accordance with which we have had no Ministerial contacts with Belarus. Officials from this Department made clear to Deputy Foreign Minister Martynov in London in September our concerns about the constitutional and human rights situation.

Commonwealth Summit (Bananas and Sugar)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he had with representatives of Commonwealth Governments at Edinburgh concerning *(a)* the World Trade Organisation judgment on trade in bananas and *(b)* the consequential effects of such judgment on the Lomé agreement, with particular reference to its protocol concerning sugar. [13390]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met representatives of Caribbean Commonwealth Governments and discussed, among other things, their concerns about the implications of the World Trade Organisation ruling. He made clear that the UK would work for a new EC banana regime which was consistent with WTO rules and which took account of our obligations under the Lomé convention. He did not discuss the potential effects of the ruling on other preferential effects of the ruling on other preferential trading arrangements provided for under the Lomé convention. The Edinburgh economic declaration notes our support for the legitimate interests of the African Caribbean and Pacific banana producers and our resolve to work for a successor arrangement to the Lomé convention which gives the ACP adequate transitional arrangements.

European Treaties

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs with which person or body articles of ratification of the treaty of Amsterdam will be deposited; if there is any time limit on such action; and what obligations will be placed on any member state, other than those entered into in the current treaties, if they are unable to deposit such articles or other necessary documents. [13050]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Instruments of ratification of the Treaty of Amsterdam will be deposited with the Italian Government. No time limit has been set for ratifying the treaty. The treaty will only enter into force after all member states have ratified it and it will therefore impose no obligations on a state which does not ratify it.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish prior to consideration of the Bill enabling Her Majesty's Government to ratify the treaty of Amsterdam a consolidated version of the principal treaties of the European Community and Union combining the content of the treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam. [13054]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The intergovernmental conference agreed to attach to the Final Act, for illustrative purposes, the texts of the treaty on European Union and the treaty establishing the European Community as they result from the amendments made by the Treaty of Amsterdam. These texts are set out in Cm 3780. They do not form part of the treaty of Amsterdam and do not themselves require ratification.

Immigration Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many letters from hon. members have been received since May relating to immigration matters; how many were received in the same period last year; what percentage of replies to hon. Members are signed by a Minister; and what are the factors which determine that such replies are signed in this way. [13199]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Between 1 May and 31 October 5,812 letters were received from Members; 4,321 were received in the same period last year; around 11 per cent. are signed by a

Minister. There are no set factors determining which letters are signed by a Minister; each case is considered individually.

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes he proposes to make in his Department's cash limits and running cost limits for 1997–98. [14286]

Mr. Fatchett: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates the following changes will be made:

The cash limit for class II, vote 1 (Overseas Representation) will be increased by £9,050,000 from £619,826,000 to £628,876,000. The increase is required to cover the costs of major conferences, specifically the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the EU Presidency and the Asia Europe Meeting, which total £9,000,000. There is also a transfer in of £50,000 from the Home Office for a contribution towards the fight against international drug trafficking.

The gross running costs limit on class II, vote 1 will be increased by £9,050,000 from £525,763,000 to £534,813,000.

The cash limit for class II, vote 2 (Other External Relations) will be increased by £12,600,000 from £217,215,000 to £229,815,000. The increase is required to cover UK contributions to certain OSCE, United Nations and WEU Missions of £12,000,000 and also for a transfer of £600,000 from the Home Office towards certain Overseas Drugs Assistance Programmes.

In addition, the cash limit for class II, vote 3 (BBC World Service) will be reduced by £2,558,000 from £169,906,000 to £167,348,000. This reduction takes account of transfers to the Ministry of Defence of £3,444,000 and to the Cabinet Office of £327,000 to reflect the movement of the BBC World Service Monitoring Service to subscription-based funding. This is partially offset by the take-up of a capital end-year flexibility amount of £1,213,000 as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July, *Official Report*, columns *245–50*.

The increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve, and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Human Rights

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations concerning abuses of human rights Her Majesty's Government have made to the Czech and Slovak Republics. [13491]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* We are aware of reports of incidents of discrimination against members of the Roma community in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. We have been in contact with the Governments of the two countries, and do not consider these to be institutionalised abuses of human rights.

Burma

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress towards democracy in Burma since 1 May. [14072]

Mr. Fatchett: The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) continue to repress pro-democracy and ethnic groups, and remain unwilling to enter into substantive dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi and other political leaders. Ministers have made several statements since 1 May condemning the SLORC's policies, and have supported the introduction of tougher measures against the SLORC at both the national and EU level.

Australia

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his Australian counterpart concerning the arrangements being made for testing parliamentary and public opinion in Australia on whether that country should become a republic; and if he will make a statement. [14395]

Mr. Fatchett: None.

Antarctic

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have been held with the Government of Japan concerning ratification of the Antarctic treaty. [14218]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Officials have discussed the ratification of the Environmental Protocol to the Antarctic Treaty with their Japanese counterparts several times in the past few months and have used these occasions to encourage Japan to ratify it at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions have taken place with the signatory nations to the Antarctic Environmental protocol; and when he expects to be able to make an announcement on the siting of the secretariat. [14219]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There have been no further discussions since the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) in New Zealand in May this year when the Consultative Parties were unable to reach consensus on the location of the Secretariat. The next ATCM will be in May 1998.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Girocheques (Reissues)

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what was the percentage increase in 1996 of reissues of girocheques *(a)* in total and *(b)* by social security office that involved losses to her Department; and if she will make a statement. [13021]

Mr. Worthington: Responsibility for the subject has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its chief executive, Mr. Chris Thompson. I have asked him to arrange for a response to be given.

Letter from Chris Thompson to Mr. Robert McCartney, dated 31 October 1997:

I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question on the percentage increase, in 1996, of re-issues of girocheques.

The percentage increase in 1996–97 of re-issued girocheques to benefit customers in Northern Ireland which led to losses to the Department of Health and Social Services was 16.9 per cent. This percentage excludes 234 re-issues in 1995–96 and 982 re-issues in 1996–97 which are still under investigation. The percentage change for each Social Security Office is given in the attached table.

The main reason for the increase between 1995–96 and 1996–97 is that from November 1995, procedures in the Social Security Agency were brought in line with those of the Benefits Agency in Great Britain to reflect the legal position.

Case law in Great Britain on the treatment of claims and payments places the burden of proof on the Department to show that the customer has received benefit from an instrument of payment which has been lost or stolen. This means that the Social Security Agency cannot delay in making a replacement payment, for example, to await the trace encashment of the original girocheque. Within this procedure, all reasonable practical precautions are of course taken before a payment is reissued.

The Agency attaches much importance to the prevention of fraud and the use of taxpayers' money and, taking account of the concern expressed, is reviewing its existing procedures.

I hope this explains the position for you but I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

Number of girocheques re-issued with losses

Issuing office	*1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996 Loss*	*1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997 Loss*	*Increase/ decrease*	*Percentage*
Antrim SSO	25	32	+7	+28
Armagh SSO	24	23	–1	–4
Ballymena SSO	34	60	+26	+76.4
Ballymoney SSO	8	15	+7	+87.5
Ballynahinch SSO	4	5	+1	+25
Banbridge SSO	4	12	+8	+200
Bangor SSO	36	64	+28	+77.8
Carrickfergus SSO	19	67	+48	+252.6
Coleraine SSO	40	60	+20	+50
Cookstown SSO	7	18	+11	+157.1
Downpatrick SSO	41	24	–17	–41.5
Dungannon SSO	30	34	+4	+13.3
Enniskillen SSO	19	36	+17	+89.5
Foyle SSO	178	213	+35	+19.7
Headquarters	58	57	–1	–1.7
Kilkeel SSO	1	4	+3	+300
Larne SSO	12	16	+4	+33.3
Limavady SSO	36	35	–1	–2.8
Lisburn SSO	35	30	–5	–14.3
Lisnagelvin SSO	28	47	+19	+67.9
Lurgan SSO	22	23	+1	+4.5
Magherafelt SSO	3	10	+7	+233.3
Newcastle SSO	14	6	–8	–57.1
Newry SSO	82	73	–9	–11
Newtownards SSO	43	38	–5	–11.6
Omagh SSO	24	40	+16	+66.7
Portadown SSO	31	33	+2	+6.5
Strabane SSO	35	54	+19	+54.3
Andersonstown SSO	138	195	+57	+41.3

Number of girocheques re-issued with losses

Issuing office	*1 April 1995 to 31 March 1996 Loss*	*1 April 1996 to 31 March 1997 Loss*	*Increase/ decrease*	*Percentage*
Corporation Street SSO	241	242	+1	+0.4
Falls Road SSO	157	144	–13	–8.3
Holywood Road SSO	79	58	–21	–26.6
Knockbreda SSO	32	32	0	0
Newtownabbey SSO	30	49	+19	+63.3
Shaftesbury Square SSO	95	69	–26	–27.4
Shankill Road SSO	89	132	+43	+48.3
Total	1,754	2,050	+296	+16.9

Southern Health and Social Services Council

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which members of the Southern health and social services council belong to *(a)* the SDLP, and *(b)* the Ulster Unionist party; how many of these appointments were recommended by representatives of the Irish Government; and if she will make a statement. [13012]

Mr. Worthington: Monitoring information on the political activity of appointees to the Health and Social Services Councils has only been collected since July 1996. Of the 10 places, out of a full membership of 24, reserved on the Southern Health and Social Services Council for District Council nominees, five are held by SDLP members and five are held by members of the Ulster Unionist Party. The monitoring information held by the Department indicates that no political activity has been undertaken by the other members in the last five years.

None of the members of the Southern Council were recommended for consideration for appointment by representatives of the Irish Government.

Paramilitary Beatings

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list all recorded instances of paramilitary beatings in the period since the Provisional IRA ceasefire of July 1997, indicating in each instance whether the event was carried out by loyalist or republican groups and giving the equivalent figures of the preceding six months. [13856]

Mr. Ingram: The table illustrates the number of paramilitary style assaults and paramilitary shootings attributed to Loyalist and Republican groups since the Provisional IRA ceasefire on 20 July 1997 and equivalent figures for the previous six months.

Casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks

Attribution	*Casualties as a result of paramilitary style assaults*			*Casualties as a result of paramilitary style shootings*			*Total casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks*		
	Loyalist	*Republican*	*Total*	*Loyalist*	*Republican*	*Total*	*Loyalist*	*Republican*	*Total*
Dates									
20 January 1997 to 19 July 1997	42	47	89	26	14	40	68	61	129
20 July 1997 to 28 October 1997	18	14	32	9	3	12	27	17	44

Forest Service

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for the future organisation of the Forest Service of the Department of Agriculture. [14838]

Majorie Mowlam: As my colleague the Minister with responsibility for this matter, Lord Dubs, announced in another place on 16 October in reply to a question from baroness Nicol, *Official Report, House of Lords,* column 200, following consideration of a Prior Options Study, which was announced to Parliament on 7 March 1995, the Government have decided that the Forest Service should become a Next Steps Agency and that preparations should proceed with a view to agentisation with effect from 1 April 1998.

The Forest Service is responsible for the implementation of Government forestry policy within Northern Ireland and performs broadly the same functions as the Forestry Commission in Great Britain. Agency status will give the service more flexibility in its commercial operations and in the delivery of Government forestry objectives.

Health Authority Budgets

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the *(a)* actual deficit and *(b)* projected deficit of each health authority as a percentage of its budget for the last three years. [14464]

Mr. Worthington: The following schedule gives *(a)* the actual deficit for each of the HSS Health Boards in Northern Ireland for the years 1994–95, 1995–96, 1996–97 as per the audited accounts and *(b)* the deficit expressed as a percentage of each board's budget figure.

Retained deficits of HPSS boards Northern Ireland

Board	1994–95 Deficit (£ million)	1994–95 Percentage of budget	1995–96 Deficit (£ million)	1995–96 Percentage of budget	1996–97 Deficit (£ million)	1996–97 Percentage of budget
EHSSB	1.986	0.37	–	–	5.15	0.95
SHSSB	–	–	1.582	0.62	5.2	0.2
WHSSB	1.139	0.53	2.653	1.16	1.02	0.44

NHSSB recorded a surplus in each of the three years.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the *(a)* actual deficits and *(b)* projected deficits of each health trust as a percentage of their budgets for the last three years. [14271]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The schedule gives *(a)* the actual deficit for each of the HSS trusts in Northern Ireland for the years 1994–95, 1995–96, 1996–97 as per the audited accounts and *(b)* the deficit figure expressed as a percentage of each trust's total income.

Retained deficits of HSS trusts (Northern Ireland)

Trust	1994–95 Deficit (£ million)	1994–95 Percentage of income	1995–96 Deficit (£ million)	1995–96 Percentage of turnover	1996–97 Deficit (£ million)	1996–97 Percentage of turnover
BCH	0.997	1.22	0.586	0.69	2.406	2.66
CAH	0.191	0.45	0.344	0.76	1.288	2.82
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	0.086	1.22	—	—	0.01	0.05
UNDAH	1.014	1.94	0.32	0.56	1.857	3.21
RGH	—	—	—	—	1.225	0.9
Green Park	—	—	1.118	2.34	0.519	1.04
Mater	—	—	—	—	0.007	0.38
Craigavon/Banbridge	—	—	—	—	0.088	0.27
Newry/Mourne	—	—	—	—	0.25	0.58
North and West Belfast	—	—	—	—	0.839	0.99
Causeway	—	—	0.378	0.8	—	—
Altnagelvin	—	—	—	—	0.109	0.23
Armagh/Dungannon	—	—	—	—	0.092	0.16

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Dispute Resolution

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how he intends to promote greater use of alternative dispute resolution in place of civil litigation. [13312]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor has recently approved pilot schemes for alternative dispute resolution at Bristol county court and in the Court of Appeal. A mediation pilot scheme has been running at Central London county court since May 1996. Before deciding the next steps, the Lord Chancellor will consider the outcome of research on the Central London scheme. The initial report is expected early next year.

EU Regulations

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps Her Majesty's Government have taken to ensure the up-to-date publication of all amendments to the current United Kingdom law occasioned by European Union regulations. [13387]

Mr. Hoon: Queen's Printer's copies of all newly enacted Acts of Parliament and of Statutory Instruments implementing amendments to current United Kingdom law occasioned by European Union regulations are published promptly by The Stationery Office Limited. The text is also made available on the Internet. The explanatory note at the end of each Statutory Instrument which implements a European Union obligation will identify and cite the relevant European Union instrument.

The Lord Chancellor's Department is setting up a statute law database to ensure publication of up to date amended text of United Kingdom Public General Acts of Parliament. Amendments made to those Acts by United Kingdom legislation in implementation of European Union obligations will be duly incorporated. It is not at present intended that the statute law database should include amended text of Statutory Instruments.

Living Wills

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to amend the law relating to living wills; and if he will make a statement. [13146]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission report on mental incapacity published in 1995 includes recommendations relating to advance statements (sometimes referred to as living wills). As I indicated in my written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) on 28 October, *Official Report*, column *787*, the Government do not consider that it would be appropriate to legislate on the basis of these recommendations without fresh public consultation. It is hoped that a consultation paper will be issued by the end of the year.

Magistrates Courts Committees (West Yorkshire)

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received from magistrates in West Yorkshire over the work of the joint magistrates committees; and if he will make a statement. [13398]

Mr. Hoon: I have received a letter from one magistrate from West Riding Metropolitan Magistrates Courts Committee which questioned the necessity for a magistrates courts committee for the area. I have also received a letter from the chairman of the Wakefield bench of that MCC concerning the committee's proposals to reallocate duties from the deputy clerks to an increased number of justices clerks and to remove the post of deputy clerk.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Tourism

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list his Department's priorities in relation to tourism during the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union. [12972]

Mr. Tom Clarke: We believe that the main aim for the Tourism Unit in the Commission should be to ensure that, across the range of Commission responsibilities, account should be taken of the impact on tourism of decisions and actions, and that the employment and other opportunities represented by tourism should be recognised.

We shall be announcing specific events for the British presidency relating to the Department's various responsibilities in due course.

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Miller: to ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what changes he proposes to make to his Department's cash limit and running cost limit for 1997–98. [14011]

Mr. Chris Smith: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the cash limit for class X, vote 1 will be increased by £6,100,000 from £867,853,000 to £873,953,000 and the running costs limit reduced by £746,000 from £30,091,000 to £29,345,000. This is to provide for an increase in provision for the British Library St. Pancras project; to provide for additional maintenance expenditure for the British Library; an increase in provision for the refurbishment of Somerset House for the housing of the Gilbert Collection; transfers from the Department of Trade and Industry (class IV, vote 1) for Sector Challenge funding of tourist and media projects and for sponsorship of the music industry; and a transfer to the Home Office (class VII, vote 1) for voluntary services.

The increases will be offset by transfers, savings and charges to the Reserve, and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

PRIME MINISTER

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has to change the Cabinet Office: Security and Intelligence Services cash limits for 1997–98. [14278]

The Prime Minister: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class XVIII, vote 2 will be increased by £5,606,000 from £713,307,000 to £718,913,000. The running costs cash limit will be increased by £5,606,000 from £362,082,000 to £367,688,000. The increase in running costs is needed to take on board transfers from OPS to the FCO and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Mr. Bill O'Brien: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals there are to change the 1997–98 cash limit or running costs limit for the Cabinet Office: other services vote. [14308]

The Prime Minister: The cash limit for Cabinet Office: other services (class XVIII, vote 1) will be increased by £1,291,000 from £36,153,000 to £37,444,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £1,291,000 from £42,803,000 to £44,094,000.

This is to reflect a transfer of £168,000 from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (class II, vote 3) for the BBC World Service Monitoring Service, which is moving to subscription based funding. The vote is also eligible for a running costs cash limit increase of £1,123,000 in respect of end year flexibility arrangements, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *245–250*.

The increase will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve, and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers living in the London borough of Barnet have had *(a)* a final determination of their asylum application made adverse to them and *(b)* how many of *(a)* above have been moved into deportation areas and have not yet left the country; and what is the cost to the London borough of Barnet and to central Government of supporting such persons, in total and on average. [13119]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that the information requested is not available centrally. Information on where asylum seekers are living is not available centrally: we cannot therefore give any information on asylum seekers in the London borough of Barnet.

Dr. Fox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many unsuccessful asylum seekers are currently awaiting deportation from England and Wales; [13769]

(2) how many unsuccessful asylum seekers are currently awaiting deportation from Scotland. [13770]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that the information is not available separately for England and Wales, or for Scotland.

The available information relates to asylum seekers whose initial decision was a refusal, who have subsequently had a deportation order signed and who have not yet left the United Kingdom. As at 30 September 1997, there were 1,510 such persons. That figure is provisional and excludes persons treated as illegal entrants or subject to port refusal procedures.

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals he has for changes to the 1997–98 cash and running costs limits within his responsibilities. [14066]

Mr. Straw: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary token supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class VII, vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales) will be reduced by £510,000 from £4,729,171,000 to £4,728,661,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £5,251,000 from £1,887,680,000 to £1,892,931,000.

The changes in the cash limit are the net effect of the following:

A transfer of £490,000 from the non voted cash limit HO/LACAP to fund expenditure on the National Crime Squad Headquarters. The transfer will reduce the HO/LACAP cash limit from £89,546,000 to £89,056,000.

Transfers to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of £50,000 for the International Drugs Co-ordinator post and £600,000 in respect of inter-departmental drugs prevention projects in Pakistan and Colombia. A transfer to the Department of Health of £350,000 in respect of the Drugs Challenge Fund.

The increase in the running costs limit is the net effect of payments relating to the transfer of responsibility for voluntary services from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport of £771,000; £30,000 for a payment from Cabinet Office in respect of the Government Information Service Head of Profession; £4,500,000 due to increased demand for passports and a transfer to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of £50,000 for the International Drugs Co-ordinator post.

The increases will be offset by transfers and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Derbyshire Police Authority

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much money has been given to Derbyshire county council through the revenue support grant for the county's police authority in each of the last three years. [13755]

Mr. Michael: The Derbyshire Police Authority is independent from the county council, an arrangement which was consequent on the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994. It is the Police Authority which is responsible for setting the budget. The budget is made up of police grant, revenue support grant, non-domestic rates (the business rate) and the police authority precept raised through the council tax. Providing the revenue support grant figure on its own would be uninformative and I have therefore provided a table which shows how the total spending power was made up in the three years referred to in the question.

Derbyshire Police Authority

£ million

Year	*Home Office grant*	*Revenue support grant*	*Non-domestic rates*	*Police precept (Council tax)*	*Total spending power*
1995–96	43.76	13.71	17.8	13.02	88.3
1996–97	46.36	13.14	19.7	13.3	92.5
1997–98	48.09	14.09	18.89	15.28	96.3

Mr. Jonathan Aitken

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis is to complete his investigations into the alleged perjury of Mr. Jonathan Aitken during his High Court action against *The Guardian*; and if he will make a statement. [13768]

Mr. Michael: This investigation is an operational matter for the Commissioner. The Commissioner informs me that the investigation is continuing and is being pursued as expeditiously as possible. At this time the Metropolitan Police do not have a date for the conclusion of the investigation. When the investigation is complete a report will be sent to the Crown Prosecution Service.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14374]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster today.

Police Forces (Staff)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total number of *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilian support staff, in each police force on (i) the last day for which figures are available and (ii) 1 May for each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [13724]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The latest date for which figures are available are those for 31 March 1997. Since 1995, police numbers are collected only twice a year. The strength figures for 1995 and 1996 are therefore those at 31 March. Prior to April 1995, they were collected every month. Police strength figures for 1992, 1993, and 1994 are therefore those for 30 April. Between 30 April 1992 and 30 March 1997, the number of police officers fell by 336. During the same period, the number of civilian support staff increased by 5,568. The information is set out in tables which have been placed in the Library.

Police Act 1997

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when part V of the Police Act 1997 will be brought into force. [14174]

Mr. Michael: We are currently reviewing the provisions of part V of the Police Act 1997 in the light of our top priority in this area which is the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

Immigration

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the criteria which govern the granting of exceptional leave to remain. [14207]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The criteria governing the granting of exceptional leave to remain depend on the particular exercise of discretion outside the Immigration Rules from which a person seeks to benefit. In addition, the Home Secretary may permit any foreign national to remain in the United Kingdom.

Sex Offenders

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what new measures he proposes to take to protect the community from sex offenders who pose a risk to the public. [14703]

Mr. Straw: I have published today a consultation paper on community protection orders. Copies are available in the Library.

I propose that the chief officer of police will have the power to apply for an order in the civil courts if the behaviour of a person who has been convicted or cautioned for a sex offence, whether in this country or abroad, poses a risk of serious harm to the public.

The order will require the defendant to register under the provisions of the Sex Offenders Act 1997, if he is not already required to do so. The court may also impose other prohibitory conditions as are necessary to protect the public.

Fire Safety

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has received the final report of the Community Fire Safety Task Force. [14547]

Mr. Straw: I have received the report of the Community Fire Safety Task Force and made arrangements for it to be published on 3 November. Copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The task force was asked last November to propose a five year strategy to reduce the number of fires and fire casualties in dwellings. It has highly commended the enthusiasm with which fire safety and prevention work is already undertaken by some brigades. It wants to build on their success by putting community fire safety at the centre of both policy and action. It recommends a more integrated and business like approach to community fire safety, with the establishment of a national centre to co-ordinate activity and an increased role for Her Majesty's Fire Service inspectorate to support brigades in the delivery of imaginative, well targeted messages. It also recommends that community fire safety should be made a statutory duty of the fire service.

I am grateful to task force members, who came from both the public and private sectors, for delivering an imaginative report in less than a year. I share their high regard for the enthusiasm and expertise of the fire service. It is a high performing service with an excellent record to which I pay tribute.

We must, however, all be concerned by the rising trend in domestic fires, deaths and casualties and the task force therefore makes a strong case for an increased and co-ordinated emphasis on community fire safety. Community safety is not solely about reducing crime. It is about our wider responsibilities to make our

communities safe and confident. This report is an important contribution to that overall aim and I note that it strongly endorses the multi-agency approach.

Before I take any decisions on the details of the strategy, I want to hear the views of chief officers, fire authorities and unions who have a crucial role to play in translating the strategy into action. We will therefore be consulting interested parties over the next few months before deciding how to respond to the report.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies, on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13261]

Mr. Straw: Expenditure by the Department, its agencies and non departmental bodies (NDPBs), on tax consultants and other tax advice for the three years in question is:

	1995–96 £	*1996–97* £	*1997–98* £
(a) Departmental			
(i) Tax Consultants	—	—	—
(ii) Other	49,688	30,550	16,450
(b) Agencies			
(i) Tax Consultants	—	—	—
(ii) Other	—	25,000	—
(c) NDPBs			
(i) Tax Consultants	11,268	45,543	4,000
(ii) Other	42,475	36,672	38,070

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13262]

Mr. Straw: The Department's policy is not to use tax advisers for tax avoidance purposes. Such advisers may be used to assist the Department in meeting its statutory tax obligations.

Remand (Juveniles)

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for implementing court-ordered secure remand for juveniles. [14548]

Mr. Michael: At present, when juveniles—aged 10 to 16 years—are charged and not released on bail after a court appearance, they are remanded to local authority accommodation. The local authority may, if it can satisfy certain strict conditions, return to the court and seek a secure accommodation order to place the juvenile in local authority secure accommodation. Separate arrangements exist for 15 and 16-year-old boys who may be remanded direct to prison, again if strict conditions are met. The courts have no power to require any juvenile in this age group to be remanded directly to local authority secure accommodation.

There are, however, existing provisions on the statute book but not yet brought into force which would allow this to happen. Section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 contains provision for the abolition of prison remands for 15 and 16-years-old boys, and gives courts a power to remand these boys. as well as 15 and 16-year-old girls, directly to local authority secure accommodation. Section 20 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 provides for the extension of court-ordered secure remands to 12 to 14-year-olds but only once the provision in section 60 of the 1991 Act has been implemented for 15 and 16-year-olds.

Before the Government can implement section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and the provisions in the 1994 Act, there must be available a sufficient number of places to meet the expected demand. This is not the case at the moment. Whilst a building programme was put in place to provide 170 new secure places in local authority accommodation for this purpose, the number of juveniles remanded in custody has increased significantly since the building programme began and prison remands now typically stand within the 250 to 300 range. The demand from this group alone would significantly outstrip the capacity of the local authority secure estate even once the building programme has been completed.

The Government are keen to begin implementation of those provisions and have decided to do so in stages. The Government will, therefore, implement the provision in relation to 12 to 14-year-olds as soon as practicable.

The Government, therefore, propose:

(a) that court-ordered secure remands for 12 to 14-year-olds and 15 and 16-year-old girls will be implemented as soon as practicable; and

(b) that the courts should be able to remand the most vulnerable 15 and 16-year-old boys direct to local authority secure accommodation rather than to prison, subject to certain criteria and if a place has been identified in advance.

Under the existing legislation court-ordered secure remands for 12 to 14-year-olds cannot be implemented without first doing the same for 15 and 16-year-olds. The Government intend to use this Session's Crime and Disorder Bill to make the necessary legislative changes; Royal Assent is unlikely before summer 1998. The Government remain committed to implementing the provisions in full and will keep the position under review, but we believe that our current approach is the most practical and effective way forward.

As part of the Government's comprehensive spending review, we are also conducting a study of the whole range of secure accommodation for young people, including the local authority secure units. The Government wish to ensure that the assets and other resources employed in the accommodation and care of accused, convicted and other juveniles who need secure accommodation are used to best effect, including in meeting their educational needs and, where relevant, in tackling their offending behaviour. We will want to see how the proposed court-ordered remands and the associated accommodation fit into our plans for coming to grips with the present range of facilities which make up the juvenile secure estate. Our aim is to press on with this work as quickly as possible.

On 15 October, Directors of Social Services in England and Wales and the representative bodies of the local government associations and the directors of social services were informed of the Government's decision to implement these existing provisions. It was also suggested that there should be a meeting to discuss these proposals and the study of the juvenile secure estate. It is hoped that this meeting will take place shortly.

Raves

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he intends to take to prevent the use of motorway service stations for rave parties; and if he will make a statement. [14315]

Mr. Michael: There are already powers available to the police to deal with the problem of illegal rave parties. Sections 63–67 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 empower the police to direct persons assembling on land to leave where it is believed that a large-scale gathering—of 100 or more—will take place and would cause serious distress to the inhabitants of the locality by the playing of amplified music during the night. Furthermore, in order to assist the police in preventing such events from taking place, the Act provides them with pre-emptive powers to direct people to leave the land where they reasonably believe that those people are preparing or gathering for such an event. The police also have powers to stop persons proceeding to a rave, or an intended rave, within a radius of five miles of its site.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many police man-hours were spent on the policing of rave parties in the last financial year in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Cheshire; [14314]

(2) what was the total cost of policing rave parties in the last financial year in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Cheshire. [14316]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is not held centrally. The costs of specific activities carried out by the police is a matter for chief officers but police forces do not routinely hold information about the time spent on or the costs of individual operations. However, I understand from the Chief Constable of Cheshire that there were two rave parties in the last financial year at the M62 motorway service station at Burtonwood. A total of 220 officer hours was used in the policing of these events at a cost of approximately £3,600.

David Shayler

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the injunction against *The Mail on Sunday* remains in force following the publication of further disclosures from David Shayler on 2 November. [14900]

Mr. Straw: Yes. The purpose of the injunction which the High Court granted against *The Mail on Sunday* was to prevent it from publishing any further material which could damage national security. The terms of the injunction restrained the newspaper from publishing any information provided by Mr. Shayler, but expressly did not apply to the publication of any material in respect of which the Crown serves written notice that it does not seek to restrain publication. The Editor of *The Mail on Sunday* provided me with a draft of the article which he proposed to publish well in advance of the publication date. This enabled me to obtain an assessment from the Director General of the Security Service, who advised me that the article would not cause damage to national security if it were published. Notice was therefore given that we would not seek to restrain publication. The fact that the article was substantially wrong is another matter. The issue here is not necessarily whether a story is true or false as it is quite possible to conceive circumstances in which false accusations might nevertheless cause damage to national security.

This is entirely consistent with the position which the Government have adopted all along. Our concern is to ensure that nothing is published which is likely to damage national security. Former members of the Security and Intelligence Services are in a position to make disclosures which intentionally or unintentionally can cause real damage to national security. The Government cannot stand by and let that happen. We have, however, never sought to suppress criticism of the Security Service—even where that criticism is misguided or inaccurate—provided that national security is not damaged.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what proposals he has to change the 1997–98 cash limit or running cost limit for the Office of Public Service. [14158]

Dr. David Clark: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the cash limit for the Office of Public Service (Class XVII, Vote 1) will be increased by £17,760,000 from £141,061,000 to £158,821,000 and the gross running cost limit will be decreased by £52,000 from £80,475,000 to £80,423,000.

The changes reflect the take up of end-year flexibility of £9,000,000 under the end-year flexibility scheme announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *245–250*; an increase of £10,000,000 for gross provisions for opportunity cost rents; and transfers to the Department of Trade and Industry (Class IV, Vote 1) £300,000 and the Employment Service (Class IX, Vote 3) £940,000.

The increase will be offset by transfers or charge to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14379]

Dr. David Clark: A full list of statutory instruments laid before the House, whether under the affirmative or the negative procedure during the summer adjournment, is contained in the House of Commons Votes and Proceedings dated Monday 27 October 1997, which has been publicly available since Tuesday 28 October 1997.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Beef Refreshment Department

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee what were the countries of origin of beef served in the Palace of Westminster in each of the last three months; and if he will make a statement as to the percentage of beef supplied from each country. [13962]

Mr. Turner: All beef served by the House of Commons Refreshment Department during the last three months was of British origin.

Parliamentary Groups

Mr. Forth: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what steps he is taking to ensure the compliance of all parliamentary groups and committees to be recognised and listed with the rules and undertakings required of them, with particular reference to those referring to membership. [12540]

Mrs. Roe *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* At its meeting on 4 November, the Administration Committee considered whether any amendments to the existing regulations concerning All Party and Parliamentary Groups might be appropriate. The Committee determined that the current regulations, approved by the House on 20 March 1997, were adequate, and did not consider that further revision was necessary. However, I would expect any hon. Member to draw to my attention any incidences of where they consider the regulations might have been breached.

HEALTH

Pharmaceutical Industry

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what formal discussions he has held with pharmaceutical industry leaders. [13921]

Ms Jowell: My noble Friend, the Minister for Health holds the main ministerial responsibility for the pharmaceutical industry. She met representatives of their trade association, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, on 17 June. A further meeting is planned for 26 November. Both she and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health have also had a number of informal meetings with representatives of individual companies.

Officials also keep us in touch with matters of concern to the industry through the joint industry/government Industry Strategy Group, a forum which meets regularly to discuss issues of mutual interest.

Child Labour

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to implement the remainder of European Council directive 94/22/EC on the Protection of Young People at Work on child employment, following its consultation with local authorities and others. [13912]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will announce in due course proposals further to safeguard the interests of young people at work.

NHS Charges Certificates (Stockton)

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS charges certificates (AG3) were awarded in the area of Stockton borough council or the related local DSS offices; and what plans he has to improve the quality of information available to the public in respect of the use of the certificates. [13744]

Mr. Milburn: National Health Service low income Scheme charges certificates AG3 were replaced by HC3 from 1 June 1997. The new version was introduced following consumer testing and provides clear information to the user. During the period 1 December 1996, when computer records were introduced, to 31 May 1997, when the AG3 was replaced, 2,855 AG3s were sent to people providing a Stockton postcode ("TS") with their low income scheme claim.

Cash Limits

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes will be made to the cash limits of his Department in 1997–98. [13695]

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes will be made to the cash limits of his Department in 1997–98. [14054]

Mr. Dobson: Subject to parliamentary approval, the cash limit for class XI, vote 1 (hospital, community health, family health and related services, England) will be increased by £3,982,000 (from £29,349,456,000 to £29,353,438,000). This allows for a transfer of £2,457,000 from class XI, vote 2 (Department of Health administration, miscellaneous health and personal social services, England) for the Medical Device Evaluation Service and an increase of £2,000,000 for the Drugs Challenge Fund made up of a claim on the Reserve (£1,000,000) and by transfers from class VII, vote 1 (Home Office administration, police, probation, immigration and other services, England and Wales) (£350,000), class IX, vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services) (£300,000) and class XI, vote 2 (£350,000). The overall increase is partially offset by transfers of £367,000 to class XIV, vote 4 (Hospital, community health, family health services and other health services (part), Wales) for Cuyler Declaration, on rebasing of funds between central budgets and health authorities; £8,000 to Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland for the National Poisons Information Service and £100,000 to class XI, vote 2 for the Xenotransplantation Interim Authority.

The cash limit for class XI, vote 2 (Department of Health, administration, miscellaneous health services and personal social services, England) will be reduced by £2,987,000 (from £998,724,000 to £995,737,000). This reduction allows for transfers of £2,737,000 for the Medical Device Evaluation Service made up of transfers to class XI, vote 1 (Hospital, community health, family health and related services, England) (£2,457,000), class XIV, vote 4 (Hospital, community health, family health

services and other health services (part), Wales) (£187,000) and to the Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland (£93,000); and a transfer of £350,000 to class XI, vote 1 for the Drugs Challenge Fund. The overall reduction is partially offset by a transfer of £100,000 from class XI, vote 1 as mentioned above.

The non-voted cash limit for supplementary credit approvals or personal social services (DoH/LACAP) in England is to be increased by £429,000 from (£14,700,000 to £15,129,000) in respect of the take up of the end year flexibility entitlement as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *245–250*.

The Department's gross running cost limit will be reduced by £800,000 from £260,929,000 to £260,129,000. This reflects a reallocation for the NHS Health Advisory Service.

All increases will either be offset by savings, increased receipts or transfers to or from other votes or charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13267]

Ms Jowell: The Department, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) have spent the following on

	1995–96 £	*1996–97 £*	*1997–98 Estimated £*
(i) Tax consultants:			
(a) Department of Health	nil	nil	15,000
(b) DH Agencies	nil	nil	nil
(c) NCPBs	26,000	19,000	13,000

(ii) Other external tax advice: One NDPB uses a telephone Pay As You Earn advisory service at a cost of £180 per annum.

This expenditure has been to provide advice on the proper interpretation of tax law.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13268]

Mr. Milburn: The Department has used tax advisers to enable it to fulfil its statutory tax obligations rather than for tax avoidance purposes.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his assessment on the effect of the delivery of NHS services over the next two years of the need to divert moneys from within his budget to deal with the millennium computer compliance problem in the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [13250]

Mr. Milburn: The likely cost to the National Health Service of ensuring that systems are millennium compliant is difficult to forecast accurately. Guidance has recently been issued to chief executives outlining the action they are expected to take to deal with the millennium problem. Much of the work required is likely to be funded from budgets already allocated to supporting NHS information management and technology needs.

Cold-related Illnesses

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many deaths where hypothermia was mentioned on the death certificate as the main or contributory cause of death, took place in England and Wales in *(a)* 1994, *(b)* 1995, *(c)* 1996 for (i) all age groups, (ii) people aged 65 years and over and (iii) people aged 80 years and over. [14258]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 5 November 1997:

I have been asked to reply as the Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on the numbers of deaths in England and Wales where hypothermia was mentioned on the death certificate as the main or contributory cause of death in 1994, 1995 and 1996.

The information requested is shown in the table below:

Deaths with a mention of hypothermia, England and Wales 1994–96

	All ages	*Age 65 and over*	*Age 80 and over*
1994	345	286	186
1995	338	283	192
1996	414	356	244

Deaths

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many deaths were registered in England and Wales between *(a)* 1 April 1996 and 30 September 1996 and *(b)* 1 October 1996 and 31 March 1997, for people aged (i) 60 to 69 years, (ii) 70 to 79 years, (iii) over 80 years and (iv) in total. [14256]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the chief executive of the Office for National Statistics, who has been asked to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 5 November 1997:

I have been asked to reply as Director of the Office for National Statistics to your recent question on how many deaths were

registered in England and Wales between (a) 1st April 1996 and 30th September 1996 and (b) 1st October 1996 and 31st March 1997, for people aged (i) 60 to 69 years, (ii) 70 to 79 years, (iii) over 80 years and (iv) in total.

The information requested is shown in the table below:

Deaths registered in England and Wales

Age	*1 April 1996 to 30 September 1996*	*1 October 1996 to 31 March 1997*[1]
60–69 years	36,823	39.891
70–9 years	74,241	85,340
80 and over	115,932	146,033
All ages	258,596	304,804

[1] Data for 1997 are provisional.

TREASURY

European Single Currency

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what communication on the subject of the European single currency has taken place between his special adviser Ms Sue Nye and Mr. Gavyn Davies of Goldman Sachs. [13411]

Mr. Gordon Brown: None.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what applications the Government have made for EU funding to inform or persuade the public about the single European currency. [13187]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* I refer to the answer that I gave to the Member for Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on 27 October, *Official Report*, column *656.*

Application for funding is to inform businesses about the implications of the single currency, whether or not we join. It is a condition of the rules governing the EC funds that information measures must not be regarded as propaganda.

Government Debt

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total value of debt issued by the Government each day between 25 September and 18 October. [13380]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government issued £1.5 billion of 8 per cent. 2,021 stock on Thursday 25 September, and £150 million of index-linked stock on Thursday 2 October.

Government Bonds

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what changes took place in the price of Government bonds between noon and the closing of the financial markets on Thursday 25 September; [13402]

(2) what changes took place in the price of Government bonds between the opening and closing of the financial markets on Thursday 25 September. [13404]

Mrs. Liddell: The movement in the price of gilts (UK Government bonds) on Thursday 25 September are shown in the following table:

Price of benchmark gilts

	7 per cent. 2002	*7.25 per cent. 2007*	*8 per cent. 2021*
Opening price	101–06	104–21	117–13
Closing price	101–06	104–22	117–10
Change from previous day's close	+0–01	+0–02	–0–01
Day's high	101–11	104–30	117–25
Day's low	101–00	104–10	116–23

Prices quoted in 32nds.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes took place in the price of Goverrment bonds between the opening and closing of the financial markets on Friday 17 October. [13403]

Mrs. Liddell: The movement in the price of gilts (UK government bonds) on Friday 17 October are shown in the following table:

Price of benchmark gilts

	7 per cent. 2002	*7.25 per cent. 2007*	*8 per cent. 2021*
Opening price	101–15	105–09	117–17
Closing price	101–19	105–18	118–07
Change from previous day's close	–0–01	0–00	+0–05
Day's high	101–21	105–22	118–14
Day's low	101–08	104–29	117–05

Prices quoted in 32nds.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what disciplinary action has been taken against his special adviser Mr. Charlie Whelan for discussing market sensitive information in a public place; [13406]

(2) which Minister in his Department authorised his special advisers to brief *The Times* and other newspapers on the subject of the Government's policy towards European monetary union on Friday 17 October; [13407]

(3) at what locations his special adviser, Mr. Charles Whelan, conducted press briefings containing market sensitive information by mobile phone on 17 October. [13984]

Mr. Gordon Brown: The terms under which special advisers work are set out in their contracts, a model copy of which is available in the Library. These build upon the rules in force under previous Administrations.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he has *(a)* received and *(b)* requested advice on the subject of EMU from Mr. Gavyn Davies, chief economist of Goldman Sachs. [13410]

Mr. Gordon Brown: Since 1 May, and following the publication of the Lord Currie reports on EMU, Treasury Ministers and officials have received representations and information from a wide range of people, including Mr. Gavyn Davies.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what legal actions his Department is pursuing against newspapers regarding reports relating to trading in the period before the publication of Government briefing on EMU. [13408]

Mrs. Liddell: None.

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the Government have notified their European partners that the United Kingdom will not move to the third stage of economic and monetary union on 1 January 1999. [14898]

Mr. Gordon Brown: Following my statement to the House on 27 October, *Official Report*, columns 583–88, and in accordance with paragraph 1 of Protocol (No. 11) of the Maastricht Treaty, the Government formally notified the Council of the European Union on 30 October 1997 that the United Kingdom does not intend to move to the third stage of economic and monetary union on 1 January 1999. The Treaty enables the United Kingdom to reverse this notification after the beginning of the third stage.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the Government's intention to rejoin the European exchange rate mechanism two years prior to entering the third stage of EMU. [13775]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The Government have no intention of joining the ERM.

Gilts Futures

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will investigate the trading in gilts futures in the period before the *Financial Times* story of 26 September. [13409]

Mrs. Liddell: This is a matter for the regulatory authorities and their supervisors.

Registry of Friendly Societies

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to the cash limit of the Registry of Friendly Societies in 1997–98. [14753]

Mrs. Liddell: Subject to approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the cash limit for the Registry of Friendly Societies Class XVI, Vote 9 will be increased by £775,000 from £3,767,000 to £4,542,000. The additional provision is required for capital expenditure arising out of the late completion of the Department's relocation project. The increase is partially funded by the take up of £189,000 carried forward under the end year flexibility scheme for capital, as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July, *Official Report*, cols 245–50. The increase will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Cash Limits and Running Costs

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to the cash and running costs limit of Her Majesty's Treasury in 1997–98. [14754]

Mrs. Liddell: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary Supplementary Estimate, the running costs limit for Class XVI, Vote 1 will be increased by £1,051,000 from £55,509,000 to £56,560,000 and the cash limit will be increased by £1,901,000 from £61,286,000 to £63,187,000. The increases are necessary to provide for the partial take up of running costs end year flexibility as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July, *Official Report*, columns *245–50*, to meet various new commitments (net of offsetting savings and changes in receipts); to provide for a grant in aid to the Private Finance Taskforce which succeeds the Private Finance Panel; and to give effect to the Chancellor's commitment to pay over to the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund a sum equivalent to VAT paid on "Candle in the Wind".

The increase will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Reserve

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the size of the current reserve for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99. [13188]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) on 30 July 1997, *Official Report*, column *347*.

Departmental Expenditure Ceilings

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes he has made to departmental expenditure ceilings within the controlled total for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 since the budget. [13186]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The 1997–98 Summer Supplementary Estimates reallocated £65 million within the public expenditure control total. Of this £13 million was met from within existing departmental programmes and £52 million charged to the Reserve. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 14 October that £300 million would be reallocated to the NHS for patient services in 1997–98; £30 million of this would be offset by administrative savings in the health budget, £102 million from reductions in the external financing limit for BNFL and £168 million from a reduction in the MOD cash limit.

For 1998–99 the departmental expenditure ceilings within the control total remain as at the July Budget.

Government Expenditure

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of general Government expenditure for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1998–99 taking account of recent changes to the gross domestic product deflator and other factors. [13185]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The Government's estimates for general Government expenditure were set out in the FSBR in July. They were £309.0 billion for 1996–97, £319.4 billion for 1997–98 and £331.3 billion for 1998–99. These reflect the Government's plans for the cash control totals and the latest forecasts for other spending.

Legal Action (Public Funding)

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what public funding has been provided for to fund legal action currently being undertaken by his special adviser, Mrs. Sue Nye. [13983]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* None.

Two-pound Coin

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the delay in introduction of the £2 coin. [13365]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The Government have decided to change the launch date of the £2 circulation coin from 3 November 1997 to March 1998 because of a potential problem with the "electronic signature" of the coin in vending and other machines. A further statement will be made when investigative work is completed.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he intends to take to implement the Dearing Committee's recommendations on governing bodies in higher education; and if he will make a statement. [14061]

Dr. Howells: We are considering the responses to the consultation exercise undertaken following publication of the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, including the views received on the recommendations on governing bodies in higher education, and will announce our response later in the year.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of 16 to 19-year-olds in Warrington, North constituency, broken down by ward, entered higher education in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* in each of the last five years. [14060]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is not compiled centrally because, although the HESA data include the post code of each student, this is not routinely aggregated to below local authority level. The available HESA data show the number of students aged under 20 whose home LEA was Cheshire and who entered a higher education course in a UK higher education establishment (Warrington comprises around 19 per cent. of Cheshire in general population terms). The figures were 3,400 in 1994–95, 3,900 in 1995–96 and 4,300 in 1996–97. Comparable data for the years prior to 1994–95 are not readily available.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he intends to take to encourage higher education funding bodies to finance pilot projects which allocate additional funds to institutions which enrol students from particularly disadvantaged localities; and if he will make a statement. [14059]

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will follow the recommendations of the Dearing report in respect of allocating funds for higher education to those institutions committed to widening participation; and what support he plans to offer to those universities to help plan and monitor admissions and participation levels. [14359]

Dr. Howells: The Government are committed to increasing and widening access to higher education. My hon. Friend recently announced an extra £165 million for higher education in 1998–99, which includes a £36 million access package, which will benefit part-time students and those facing particular hardship, as well as an extra £4 million to enable more students to participate in higher education.

We welcome the recommendations of the Dearing report for widening access, in particular that additional funding for university places should be targeted at those institutions which put forward plans for widening access. We shall be following up these recommendations in the light of the responses to the consultation on the Dearing report.

In the meantime, we welcome the decision by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to reconvene its Advisory Group on Access and Participation. The group will be considering the possibilities for further action, including the specific actions proposed by the Dearing Committee, and will advise the Council on its access and participation strategies, including joint activity with the Further Education Funding Council and other partners.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils living in *(a)* the Devon county council area and *(b)* the Torbay travel-to-work area have been funded by the assisted places scheme in each of the last three years. [13894]

Mr. Byers: Information about the county council or travel-to-work areas from which assisted pupils originate is not collected centrally. The numbers of assisted pupils in participating schools in Devon in academic years 1994–95, 1995–96 and 1996–97 were 793,817 and 942 respectively.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have been refused all jobseeker's allowance payments after interview; and what proportion this is of those interviewed. [14216]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its chief executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Jeremy Corbyn, dated 5 November 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about how many people have been refused all Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) after interview, and what proportion this is of those interviewed. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The Employment Service conducts many different types of interview with jobseekers. These start at the new claims stage and develop as unemployment lengthens. The new jobseeker's interview is important in establishing whether jobseekers meet the labour market conditions for receiving JSA. It is normally at this stage that a Jobseeker's Agreement is drawn up and jobseekers are made aware of their responsibilities in order to receive JSA. Thereafter, entitlement to JSA is reviewed at interviews every fortnight. We also use these opportunities to offer jobseekers further advice and help in their search for work. Jobseekers are also asked to attend a Restart Interview at regular six monthly intervals at which they are offered further advice and information about employment and training opportunities. Beyond this interviews may take place for a variety of other reasons.

Questions about a jobseeker's entitlement to JSA could arise at any of the interviews referred to above. In these instances, there may be a reference to an independent Adjudication Officer for a decision on benefit entitlement.

Statistics on the numbers and types of decisions given by ES Adjudication Officers on labour market questions are recorded in a quarterly summary, the 'Analysis of Adjudication Officers' Decisions', a copy of which is held in the Library. As questions about a person's entitlement can arise during different types of interviews, it would be misleading to compare the total figures of disallowances with the total numbers of ES interviews in any given period. JSA claims can be disallowed on labour market grounds or because of failure to meet the conditions of benefit receipt. However, some broad indication of volumes can be given by comparing the total number of JSA new claims with the number of awards of "nil benefits". This means simply the number of JSA new claims that, following assessment by Benefits Agency who are responsible for JSA payment, result in no payment award. This could be for a wide variety of reasons for inadequate contributions, payments from previous employment, etc, to failure to meet the labour market conditions for receipt of JSA.

In the period from 1 April 1997 to 30 September 1997, 1,571,325 claims to JSA were processed and there were 239,567 awards of nil benefits. These figures are based primarily on information held by the JSA Payments System. They include a small number of claims held on the earlier ISCS system because they linked back to an earlier Income Support claim.

I hope this is helpful.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13256]

Dr. Howells: The Department's policy on tax advice is that tax avoidance advice may be necessary where there are complex tax issues. However, the Department would not incur expenditure on advice to reduce tax liability where the reduction does not relate to the pursuit of real gains in efficiency.

In practice, where particularly difficult tax issues arise, the Department consults the Inland Revenue or HM Customs directly. The Department has not purchased outside tax avoidance advice, and has no plans so to do.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13255]

Dr. Howells: Neither the Department nor any of its agencies has incurred any such expenditure. Where difficult tax issues arise, the Department consults the Inland Revenue or HM Customs directly.

Information relating to expenditure on tax advice by NDPBs can only be supplied at disproportionate cost.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out the differences in the level of proposed payments of higher education tuition fees between residents of the United Kingdom according to *(a)* the location of the institution at which they are studying and *(b)* their own place of normal residence; and what are the reasons for these differences. [14058]

Dr. Howells: Full-time undergraduate students will be required to contribute up to a maximum of £1,000 a year in tuition fees, depending on their parents', spouses' or own income. The requirement will apply to students resident in all parts of the United Kingdom and studying in publicly funded institutions throughout the UK, except for medical and dental students in the fifth and subsequent years of study.

Students resident in Scotland and studying in Scottish institutions on honours degree courses that are a year longer than equivalent courses elsewhere in the UK will, however, have their fees paid in the final year of the course by the Scottish Student Awards Agency. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has decided to give special consideration to such students in the light of recommendations from the Dearing and Garrick reports and in recognition that many Scottish students have had only one year's education after statutory schooling before entering university, compared with the two years that students resident elsewhere in the UK have had.

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what changes are planned in cash limits and running cost limits on votes within his responsibility for 1997–98. [14450]

Dr. Howells: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit or class IX, vote 1, Department for Education and Employment: programmes and central services, and class IX, vote 3, Employment Department will be amended as follows:

Class	*Vote*	*Existing cash limit (£)*	*Change (£)*	*New cash limit (£)*
IX	1	9,419,464,000	85,613,000	9,505,077,000
IX	3	1,155,101,000	80,376,000	1,235,477,000

The cash limit for class IX, vote 1 (Department for Education and Employment) will be increased by £85,613,000 (of which £84,930,000 is in respect of the welfare-to-work programme and is outside the Control Total) from £9,419,464,000 to £9,505,077,000.

This is the result of an increase in £83,500,000 in capital expenditure on schools and £1,330,000 in running costs in connection with the welfare-to-work programme, and £100,000 in current expenditure on millennium volunteers, all to be financed from the windfall tax as announced in the Budget on 2 July and outside the Control Total.

The Department has also taken up part of end year flexibility amounts announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July, *Official Report* columns *245–50* of £1,602,000 under the capital scheme and £172,020,000 under the structural funds scheme. An increase of £1,019,000 in expenditure on specialist schools in Section T has been offset by a corresponding decrease in the DfEE/LACAP cash limit from £73,126,000 to £72,107,000; and £40,000 has been switched from Section O (a cash limited section) to Section P (a non-cash limited section) to support additional expenditure on school council pensions.

A transfer of £300,000 has been made to class XI, vote 1 (Department of Health) for the Drugs Challenge Fund and £162,000 to class XIV, vote 2 (Welsh Office) in respect of National Vocational Qualifications. In addition, a transfer of £3,015,000 in running costs and £1,579,000 in appropriations in aid has been made to class IX, vote 3 (Employment Service) in respect of the lease for the 236 Grays Inn Road building in London. The opportunity has also been taken to transfer £600,000 from running costs to current expenditure in Section O to reclassify some expenditure on publicity.

The cash limit for class IX, vote 3 (Employment Service) will be increased by £80,376,000 from £1,155,101,000 to £1,235,477,000. The increase results from the following: £78,000,000 in respect of the welfare-to-work programme of which £48,000,000 is running costs, £25,000,000 is capital provision, and £5,000,000 is current expenditure, all financed from the windfall tax; a transfer of £3,015,000 in running costs and £1,579,000 in appropriations in aid from class IX, vote 1 (DfEE) in respect of the lease for the 236 Grays Inn Road building in London; and a transfer of £640,000 in running costs and £300,000 in capital expenditure from class XVII, vote 1 (Cabinet Office) for the lease of Ebury House, Aberdeen.

I also wish to take this opportunity to announce that the Office for National Statistics has advised that with immediate effect, Remploy Limited, should be classified as a public corporation in order to comply with the requirements of the 1995 european System of Accounts. This is a technical change only and will not affect Remploy's status as a non-Departmental Public Body, not its relationship with the Department.

As a result of these changes, the running costs provision within the Control Total for class IX, vote 1 (DfEE) will be decreased by £3,577,000 from £255,564,000 to £251,987,000 whereas the running costs provision within the Control Total for class IX, vote 3 (Employment Service) will be increased by £3,655,000 from £801,576,000 to £805,231,000. The overall running costs limit for the DfEE is therefore increased by £78,000 from £1,057,140, to £1,057,218,000.

As a result of provision relating to the welfare-to-work programme, running costs provision outside the Control Total for class IX, vote 1 (DfEE) is £1,330,00 and for class IX, vote 3 is £48,000,000, giving a non-Control Total running costs limit of £49,330,000.

The control total element of the increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

SCOTLAND

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what changes he intends to make to the cash limits and running costs provision for 1997–98 within his responsibility. [14840]

Mr. Dewar: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, I intend to make changes to nine voted cash limits, four non-voted cash blocks and seven running cost limits:

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 1, Agriculture, fisheries and environmental services, Scotland, will be increased by £3,117,000 from £309,772,000 to £312,889,000. Within this total, the running costs provision has been increased by £617,000 to £29,826,000. This takes account of £305,000 take up of end year flexibility as announced by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July (*Official Report*: columns *245–50*) for Agency running costs, and a transfer of £2,812,000 from vote 6 to provide additional grant in aid for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and additional running costs for the Fisheries Research Services Agency and Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 2, Local Government, Housing, Transport, Other Environmental Services and European Funds, Scotland will be increased by a net total of £10,301,000 from £5,473,575,000 to £5,483,876,000. The net increase reflects a transfer of £3,000,000 from SO/ERDF to cover expenditure on the empty homes and rough sleepers initiative; an increase of £1,350,000 from SO/ERDF to cover additional costs to local authorities as a result of implementation of the Pennington recommendations; a transfer of £150,000 from class V, vote 2 for the Edinburgh City car club project; an increase of £600,000 for the Council Tax District Equalisation Scheme and £1,586,000 for the Council Tax Collection scheme transferred from SO/ERDF and SO/LA1 respectively; an increase to provision for Historic Scotland of £1,845,248 covering an increase in running cost provision of £1,390,248, and an increase of £455,000 in capital provision reflecting take up of end year flexibility entitlement in respect of capital; an increase in provision of £25,000 for the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, offset by a matching reduction in class XIII, vote 6; a net increase of £1,245,000 for Roads and Transport (covering a gross increase in Roads capital of £8,620,000, an increase in the Northern Isles Ferry Services of £2,549,000 and an increase in Piers and Harbours Grant of £468,000 and offset by decreased Roads current expenditure of £5,000,000 and increased appropriations-in-aid of £5,392,000) reflecting the take up of end year flexibility; and the take up of end year flexibility for Caledonian MacBrayne (£300,000) and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. (£200,000).

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 3, Education, industry, arts and libraries, Scotland, will be increased by £4,303,000 from £1,667,405,000 to £1,671,708,000. The increased cash limit

takes account of £7,435,000 in respect of end year flexibility arrangements for capital expenditure relating to the National Museums of Scotland, the Scottish Office Pensions Agency and inward investment. The increase also includes £360,000 in respect of end-year flexibility arrangements for running costs expenditure relating to the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the Scottish Office Pensions Agency. The changes include transfers from class XIII, vote 6 totalling £300,000 in respect of both Agencies. The increase also includes a transfer of £275,000 from class IV, vote 1 in respect of support schemes and a transfer of £2,000,000 from SO/ERDF for Early Intervention. The Supplementary takes account of a transfer of £317,000 to class XIII, vote 6 in respect of software development and a reduction of £5,750,000 as a contribution towards increases in provision elsewhere in class XIII. Certain other transfers have taken place within the vote as a result of changes in Ministerial responsibilities.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 4, Hospital, community health, family health, other health services and welfare food, Scotland, will be increased by a net total of £78,745,000 from £3,628,304,000 to £3,707,049,000. The increase includes £58,798,000 reflecting the take up of end-year flexibility; a transfer of £37,000 to class XIII, vote 6 for additional expenditure by the Mental Welfare Commission on information technology and some adjustments to reflect changes to anticipated appropriations-in-aid. The NHS Trusts' External Financing Limit has also been decreased by £16,447,000 from £–11,590,000 to £–28,037,000.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 5 will be increased by £2,446,000 from £660,189,000 to £662,635,000. The increase includes the take up of end-year flexibility of £1,047,000 under the capital scheme and £699,000 under the HPSS scheme. £700,000 will be transferred from SO/ERDF to cover the advance vote 5 received from the Contingencies Fund for the referendum publicity costs. There will also be a number of minor transfers within the vote.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 6, Scottish Office Administration, is being decreased by £81,000 to £150,074,000. Within this total the running cost provision for Scottish Office Administration is being increased by £2,257,000 to £136,142,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility, primarily to finance the taking forward of various new policy initiatives and inter-vote transfers. Provision for capital expenditure is being reduced by £2,608,000 to £13,305,000 as a result of various transfers, primarily one of £2,500,000 to class XIII, vote 1 for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Provision for other current expenditure is being increased by £270,000 to £8,968,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility for health expenditure to cover computer system costs at the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 7, General Register Office for Scotland, is being increased by £750,000 to £5,817,000. Within this total, the running costs provision for GRO(S) is being increased by £150,000 to £7,550,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility to finance preparatory work for the 2001 Census. The increase in capital provision results from the take-up of end-year flexibility to cover costs of continuing refurbishment work at New Register House. The reduction in appropriations in aid is in respect of an expected fall in receipts from running the NHS Central Register, caused by a reduction in the cost of GRO(S) of operating the Register being reflected in lower charges.

The cash limit for class XIII, vote 8, Scottish Record Office, is being increased by £750,000 to £5,172,000. Within this total the SRO running costs provision is being increased by £300,000 to £4,745,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility to fund implementation of an internal reorganisation of the Department, which is aimed at delivering future efficiency savings. The increase in capital provision results from the take-up of end-year flexibility to cover costs of continuing refurbishment work at General Register House.

The cash limit element for class XIII, vote 9, Administration of justice, Scotland will be increased by a net figure of £1,700,000. This reflects an increase in capital provision of £3,000,000 to £15,700,000 offset by an increase in appropriations-in-aid of £1,300,000 to £17,341,000. Of the net figure, £1,055,000 will be met by the take up of capital end year flexibility and the remainder will be found by a reduction in running cost end-year flexibility entitlement of £645,000. The additional expenditure is required to meet the revised and higher costs of major building projects which are nearing their end-stage.

The External Financing Limit for the East of Scotland Water Authority will be increased by £5,750,000 from £51,690,000 to £57,440,000. The increase will be offset by a matching reduction in the cash limit of class XIII, vote 3.

The non-voted cash limit SO/LA1, which covers non-housing capital expenditure by local authorities, is to be increased by a net total of £22,012,830 from £389,428,000 to $411,440,830. The increase reflects the transfer of £1,586,000 to class XIII, vote 2 reflecting provision for the Council Tax Collection Scheme, and the transfer of £1,448,830 from class XIII, vote 5 in respect of CCTV scheme, and the take up of end year flexibility of £22,150,000.

The non-voted cash limit SO/LA2 which covers housing capital expenditure by local authorities will be increased by a total of £4,298,000 from £179,928,000 to £184,226,000 in respect of the take up of end year flexibility.

The non-voted cash limit SO/ERDF which covers European regional development fund expenditure in Scotland will be increased by £30,300,000 from £95,900,000 to £126,200,000. The increase takes account of the end year flexibility carried over from the financial year 1996–97.

All increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

A new non-voted cash limit will be introduced for the Capital Receipts Initiative (SO/CRI), subject to the passage of legislation, to cover the Government's initiative to release additional resources to support local authority spending on new Housing Partnerships and Welfare to Work. The limit on expenditure is set initially at £12,470,000. This expenditure is classified as outside the Control Total.

Health Authority Budgets

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the *(a)* actual deficit and *(b)* projected deficit of each health authority as a percentage of its budget for the last three years. [14465]

Mr. Galbraith: The only cash deficits in health boards in the years 1994–95 to 1996–97 are as follows:

Percentage

	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*
Orkney	0.01	0.05	0.05
Lanarkshire	—	0.01	—

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13251]

Mr. Dewar: My Department and its agencies have recorded no expenditure on external tax advice in 1995–96.

My Department spent £17,625 on external tax advice in 1996–97 and expects to spend £16,500 in 1997–98.

The agencies of my Department spent £252,000 on external tax advice in 1996–97. The agencies have not reported any plans to pay for external tax advice in 1997–98.

The information for non departmental public bodies is not held centrally.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13252]

Mr. Dewar: It is the policy of my Department to obtain such advice as is necessary to ensure that the correct amount of tax is paid on its activities.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect on hill farmers of reductions in the hill livestock compensatory allowances. [14181]

Mr. Rooker: The autumn review of the economic conditions in the hills and uplands is in progress. Rates of hill livestock compensatory allowances will be determined in the light of that review and announced to the House shortly. On the day of that announcement, the economic data which form the basis of the review will be placed in the Library of the House.

BSE

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to institute a full inquiry into *(a)* the links between bovine spongiform encephalopathy and new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and *(b)* the handling of this issue by Government. [14093]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column *5*.

Beef Export Ban

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress he has made towards lifting the export ban on British beef with UK European partners; and if he will make a statement. [13895]

Mr. Rooker: In accordance with the procedure laid down in the Florence agreement, the Commission is working on a proposal for an export certified herds scheme for consideration by the Standing Veterinary Committee. This reflects the most recent opinion for the Scientific Veterinary Committee on the UK papers. The Commission has said it expects its proposal to be presented within weeks.

We have submitted a second proposal to the Commission for a date-based export scheme which would permit export of meat from animals born after 1 August 1996. We are presenting this to be considered by the relevant scientific committees as soon as possible.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food maintain regular contact with President Santer, Commissioners Bonino and Fischler and members of the European Parliament to emphasise the importance we attach to rapid progress on lifting the export ban.

Organic Conversion Grants

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are the levels of organic conversion grants in each European Union Member state. [13795]

Mr. Morley: Full details of organic conversion grants in the member states are contained in the paper "The impact of EC Regulation 2078/92 on the development of organic farming in the European Union" by Dr. Nicholas Lampkin of the Welsh Institute of Rural Studies, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. A copy of this paper has been placed in the Library of the House.

WALES

Welsh Assembly

11. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the Government's White Paper on proposals for a Welsh Assembly. [12385]

Mr. Ron Davies: I have received representations in the form of letters both to me personally and to the Welsh Office, telephone calls to the Assembly information line, and e-mails to the Assembly website.

The great majority of the communications were requests for factual information, for example about absent voting arrangements in the referendum. Of the rest, there was generally a balance between those in favour of the Government's proposals, those neutral and those against.

Among the specific issues raised have been:

the powers of the Assembly

the use of Welsh language in the Assembly's work costs

the qualities required of Assembly members

the location of the Assembly.

18. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales who will speak on behalf of Wales in the House if a Welsh Assembly is set up; and if that person will be authorised to speak on behalf of that body. [12392]

Mr. Ron Davies: The Secretary of State for Wales will continue to represent Welsh interests in this House. The holder of that office will need to take account of the Welsh Assembly's views on various issues.

20. **Mr. Mackinlay:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the outcome of the referendum on a Welsh Assembly. [12394]

25. **Mr. Hanson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the result of the referendum on the Welsh Assembly. [12400]

Mr. Ron Davies: I refer my hon. Friend's to the reply I gave today to the hon. Member for Banbury, (Mr. Baldry).

Mrs. Laing: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the administrative cost of setting up the Assembly and of running it for the next five years. [12398]

Mr. Ron Davies: I have placed full details of the estimated set-up and running costs of the Welsh Assembly in the Library of the House, as part of the answer I gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West on 23 July this year, *Official Report*, column *638*.

Referendum Campaign

12. **Mr. Walter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the expenditure by his Department on the referendum campaign. [12386]

Mr. Ron Davies: Total expenditure on Referendum information and publicity was some £575,000. Of this, about £300,000 was accounted for by the costs of the White Paper and associated information material.

13. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales in what ways Welsh Office Ministers were involved in the referendum campaign in Wales. [12387]

Mr. Ron Davies: Alongside our official duties, I and my Ministerial colleagues campaigned vigorously and wholeheartedly for a YES vote.

Agriculture

14. **Mr. Paice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next expects to meet his European counterparts to discuss Welsh agricultural matters. [12388]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend is visiting Brussels next week and he will be having discussions on Welsh agricultural matters with the Commission.

Agri-environmental Scheme

15. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what response he has received from farming organisations and environmental interest to his announcement of an all-Wales, whole-farm, agri-environmental scheme. [12389]

Mr. Win Griffiths: A number of farming and environmental organisations have welcomed my right hon. Friend's announcement and have written to him and to the Department about implementation of the scheme.

Tuition Fees

16. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received from students regarding tuition fees. [12390]

Mr. Hain: The Department has received some 14 representations from students about tuition fees. Some have come from the National Union of Students and others have come from individual students.

Waiting Lists

17. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he will be taking to reduce NHS waiting lists in Wales before the end of 1997. [12391]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I am determined to reduce the waiting lists inherited from the previous Administration.

I have just announced a further £9.5 million of new money this year to tackle the pressures of winter emergency admissions. This is in addition to the £1.747 million also being provided this year to improve cancer services in Wales.

Roads Programme (Review)

19. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress is being made on the review of the roads in Wales programme; and when he expects to make an announcement on the outcome. [12393]

Mr. Hain: The consultation period on the review of the trunk road programme ended on 31 October. Two hundred trunk road representations have been received and these are being assessed. It is too early to say when I will be in a position to make an announcement on the outcome of the review.

Nursery Education

21. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about the funding of nursery education for children who attend nurseries outside their local authority area. [12396]

Mr. Hain: The authority securing provision, whether within or outside its area, is responsible for funding it.

Economic Development (North Wales)

22. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next plans to visit north Wales to discuss economic development with local authorities, business and trade unions. [12397]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend and I have no such plans at present. Pressure of business in the House will restrict the extent to which it is possible for us to undertake such visits. However, during the recess, I and my right hon. Friend and I have taken the opportunity to visit North Wales on many occasions and discussed economic development issues with numerous organisations, including the North Wales Economic Forum.

NHS (Cynon and Merthyr Valleys)

23. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for the NHS in the Cynon and Merthyr valleys. [12395]

Mr. Win Griffiths: It is the responsibility of Bro Taf Health Authority to assess the health needs of people in these areas, and to plan and prioritise health care services within the resources they have available. They should do this in consultation with service providers, local authorities, the Community Health Councils and other interested parties. However, I am continuing to take a close interest in health care provision in these valleys.

Cardiff Bay Barrage

24. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the environmental impact of the Cardiff bay barrage project. [12399]

Mr. Ron Davies: A full assessment of the environmental impact was undertaken before work on the Barrage began. A copy of an Environmental Statement which supported the Cardiff Bay Barrage Bill is available in the Library of the House.

Details of the environmental implications of the regeneration strategy are operational matters for the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, which is responsible for producing environmental statements for specific projects and complying with environmental legislation.

Inward Investment (Newport)

26. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to visit Newport to discuss inward investment. [12401]

Mr. Hain: While I do not have any immediate specific plans to visit Newport, I am keen to see the area build on its enviable inward investment success and to see the benefits of this spread throughout Wales, not just through the encouragement of inward investment but through the growth of indigenous business too.

Windfall Tax (Hydwr)

27. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made regarding the effect on ability to reinvest in infrastructure of Hydwr, formerly Welsh Water and Electricity, of the imposition of the windfall tax in the Budget. [12402]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made it clear that the Government does not expect the windfall tax to have any adverse impact on investment.

The company has also stated publicly that it remains committed to its current programme of discretionary capital expenditure.

Parliamentary Constituencies

28. **Mr. Garnier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received on the future number of parliamentary constituencies in Wales. [12403]

Mr. Ron Davies: None.

Local Government Finance

29. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met representatives of local government in Wales to discuss local authority funding for 1998–99. [12404]

Mr. Ron Davies: I chaired a meeting of the Welsh Consultative Council on Local Government Finance on 27 October 1997.

Arms Trade

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what guidelines his Department has given to the Welsh Development Agency with regard to sponsoring or otherwise supporting conferences in Wales aimed at encouraging trade in arms. [13325]

Mr. Hain: The Department issued guidelines covering each of the Agency's programmes in March 1995. Copies of the guidelines were placed in the Library of the House. Sponsorship and support for conferences, seminars and exhibitions is covered by the Agency's marketing guidelines. They do not specifically cover the Agency's involvement in activities related to defence industries. However, the Agency is aware of the Government's policy announced by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary which requires defence exporters to take account of ethical considerations.

Countryside Council for Wales

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he took to assess the experience and suitability of Mr. Bryan Riddleston of Celtic Energy before appointing him to serve on the board of the Countryside Council for Wales; and what other candidates he considered for the position. [13752]

Mr. Ron Davies: I followed the procedures set out in the code of practice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments whereby applicants are considered by a panel with independent membership. This panel recommended the appointment of Mr. Riddleston. Mr. Riddleston was one of 14 candidates interviewed. A total of 167 applications were received for membership of the Countryside Council for Wales.

University Students

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the amount of university funding per student in Wales in *(a)* 1994–95, *(b)* 1995–96, *(c)* 1996–97 and *(d)* 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13226]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Information on higher education funding per student in Wales for the financial years requested is as follows:

1994–95: £4,915
1995–96: £4,760
1996–97: £4,789
1997–98: £4,634

Countryside Council

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the status of the Countryside Council for Wales will be under his proposals for the Welsh Assembly. [14190]

Mr. Ron Davies: The Government's intentions are explained in its White Paper "A Voice for Wales". The Assembly will be able to review a number of non-departmental public bodies, and have the power to reduce their number further or merge them. However, the Countryside Council for Wales will not be subjected to this power in order to maintain its independence and its ability to meet the UK's European and other international obligations in nature conservation. The Assembly will, however, assume all the Secretary of State's responsibilities, including those of funding and appointment, in respect of the Council.

Cash Limits

Mr. Caton: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what changes he is proposing to make to the voted and non-voted cash limits for his Department and the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in Wales in the current financial year. [14221]

Mr. Ron Davies: Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimates, I intend to make the following changes. The cash limit on class XIV, vote 1 will be reduced by £750,000 from £53,462,000 to £52,712,000 as a result of lower than expected claims for local authority coast protection schemes.

The cash limit on class XIV, vote 2 will increase by £13,594,000 from £785,732,000 to £799,326,000. This increase results mainly from the take-up of end-year flexibility entitlements for the Welsh Development Agency (3,400,000); the Grant Maintained and Voluntary Aided Schools captial programmes (£2,720,000), an increase to the provision for Regional Selective Assistance of £1,710,00 and a transfer of £577,000 from class IV in respect of the Competitiveness Fund. The increase also includes the £5,025,000 extra resources announced in the July Budget for schools capital. (This expenditure forms part of the Welfare to Work programme and is outside the Control Total).

The cash limit on class XIV, vote 3 will be increased by £4,074,000 from £437,196,000 to £441,270,000, (including an increase in the Department's running costs limit of £1,862,000 from £72,035,000 to £73,897,000). This increase is mainly a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility amounts for the Central Government Roads Programme (£1,545,000), IT costs (£603,000) and central administration (£2,161,000).

The cash limit on class XIV, vote 4 will be increased by £28,102,000 from £1,979,708,000 to £2,007,810,000. This increase results mainly from the take-up of end-year flexibility amounts of £8,000,000 for NHS Trusts and £10,000,000 mainly for GP Fundholders and the £9,548,000 additional resources recently announced for the NHS. The external finance limit for NHS Trusts has been increased by £8,000,000 from £44,914,000 to £52,914,00.

The cash limit on class XIV, vote 5 will be increased by £200,000 from £2,340,554,000 to £2,340,754,000 to enable the Valuation Office Agency to deal with the higher than expected demand for council tax and business rate appeals.

The cash limit on class XIV, vote 6 will be reduced by £400,000 from £10,105,000 to £9,705,000 as a result of lower than expected expenditure on Nursery place inspections.

There is also an increase to the non-voted local authority capital cash limit, WO/LACAP. This cash limit has been increased by £10,682,000 from £422,680,000 to £433,362,000 as a result of the take-up of end-year flexibility amounts, mainly to cover slippage on the Strategic Development Scheme and Capital Challenge projects.

All increases will be offset by transfers or charged to the Reserve and will not, therefore, add to the planned total of public expenditure.

A new non-voted cash limit will be introduced for the Capital Receipts Initiative (WO/CRI), subject to the passage of legislation, to cover the Government's initiative to release additional resources to support local authority spending on housing and housing associated regeneration. The limit on expenditure is set initially at £9,540.000. This expenditure is classified as being outside the Control Total.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13366]

Mr. Ron Davies: My Department does not purchase tax advice.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13373]

Mr. Hain: Neither my Department nor its agency, Cadw, purchases external tax advice. Details of any such expenditure by those non-departmental public bodies sponsored by my Department are not held centrally; it is wholly a matter for them to determine as part of the day-to-day management of their affairs.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Cash and Running Cost Limits

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what changes will be made to the cash and running cost limits for her Department, the Office of Telecommunications, the Office of Gas Supply and the Office of Electricity Regulation for 1997–98 and to the external financing limit of BNFL for 1997–98. [14899]

Mrs. Beckett: Subject to Parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for class IV, vote 1—Department of Trade and Industry: programmes and administration—will be increased by £4,656,000 from £1,344,410,000 to £1,349,066,000. This net increase results from:

(i) the take up of running costs and capital end-year flexibility (£5,783,000) as announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997 (Official Report, cols 245–250);

(ii) the transfer of £300,000 from the Cabinet Office: Office of Public Service (Class XVII Vote1) to the Department's accommodation budget;

offset by:

(iii) a net reduction of £852,000 in the Local Competitiveness budget as a result of transfers to the Scottish and Welsh Offices;

(iv) an increase of £575,000 in fee income from the supervision of insurance companies.

Within this total, the gross running costs limit for the Department of Trade and Industry will be increased by £5,244,000 from £366,693,000 to £371,937,000. This change comprises the take-up of running costs end-year

flexibility and includes payment of £25,000 to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in respect of the transfer of responsibility for music sponsorship.

The take up of the Department's running costs and capital end-year flexibility (£5,783,000) will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for Class IV Vote 8—Office of Telecommunications—will be increased by £353,000 from £10,408,000 to £10,761,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £353,000 from £9,993,000 to £10,346,000. These changes reflect extra resources required for work on numbering administration and give effect to the end-year flexibility carry-forward of £280,000 announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *245–50*. The increase will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Also, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for Class IV Vote 9—Office of Gas Supply—will be increased by £1,053,000 from £10,075,000 to £11,128,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £950,000 from £11,412,000 to £12,362,000. These changes reflect the extra resources required for the extension of competition in the domestic gas market, and give effect to the end-year flexibility carry-forward of £103,000 on capital announced by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *245–50*. The increase will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

Additionally, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary supplementary estimate, the cash limit for Class IV Vote 10—Office of Electricity Regulation—will be increased by £2,000,000 from £13,950,000 to £15,950,000 and the running costs limit will be increased by £2,000,000 from £14,635,000 to £16,635,000. An increase in receipts to the consolidated fund of £2,000,000 is expected as a consequence of the increase in running costs. These changes reflect the extra resources required by the Director General of Electricity Supply to fulfil his obligations under the Electricity Act 1989, and to meet the deadlines set for deregulation of the franchised electricity supply market. The increase will be charged to the Reserve and will not therefore add to the planned total of public expenditure.

In addition to these changes, the External Financing Limit of BNFL has been adjusted from –£67,000,000 to –£169,000,000 to reflect an improved trading performance since the External Financing Limit was set in the 1996 budget.

Airfares

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action her Department is taking to ensure that full and inclusive pricing is introduced for airfares. [12984]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The practices of some operators in quoting prices for airfares may be misleading, in breach of Part III of the Consumer Protection Act 1987.

The Advertising Standards Authority Council are due to meet on 7 November to deliberate on whether certain airfare advertisements are in breach of the British Code of Advertising and Sales Promotion.

I have made clear to the airline and travel industry my concern that consumers must have clear and transparent pricing information.

Arms Sales

Sir Richard Body: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of the value of Export Credits Guarantee Department coverage has been provided for arms sales in each of the last three years; and what was the total coverage provided for arms sales in each of those years. [12724]

Mrs. Beckett: From Information readily available on ECGD's files the details requested are as follows:

Financial year	*Value of ECGD cover provided for defence business £ million*	*Value for cover for defence business as a percentage of total cover*
1994–95	725	21.4
1995–96	1,013	22.9
1996–97	384	16.3

These figures include all ECGD covered business with defence buyers, including sales of non-lethal equipment.

Bananas

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will place in the Library those parts of the world trade agreement relevant to its recent finding in respect of bananas together with a copy of the full finding or judgment, stating where, when and in what manner it was made and to whom it was addressed in the first instance. [13391]

Mrs. Roche: A copy of "The Results of the Uruguay Round of Multilateral Trade Negotiations", which includes the agreements relevant to the recent World Trade Organisation (WTO) ruling on the European Community banana regime, is currently in the Library of the House. The WTO Dispute Settlement Body ruling was sent to H.E. Mr. Roderick Abbott, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the European Communities to the WTO on 9 September 1997 and was adopted at the WTO Dispute Settlement Body meeting of 25 September 1997. Copies of both Panel and the Appellate Body rulings have been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what persons, and from which national or community body, represented United Kingdom interests in the course of proceedings at the World Trade Organisation concerning the arrangements of trade in bananas; what was the nature of the negotiating mandate given to that person and by whom; and to what body, other than Her Majesty's Government were *(i)* the nature of such a mandate and *(ii)* its existence communicated. [13389]

Mrs. Roche: A World Trade Organisation (WTO) Dispute Settlement Panel was established in May 1996 to consider a complaint against the European Community's banana regime, following unsuccessful consultations with the complainant countries (the United States, Guatemala,

Mexico, Ecuador and Honduras). Since the European Community (EC) has competence in external trade matters, United Kingdom interests in the subsequent proceedings at the WTO were represented by officials from the Commission Legal Services. The EC defended its policy and the United Kingdom supported the Commission's defence of this policy. A negotiating mandate was not required in this case. The framework for the conduct of the EC's common commercial policy is set out in Article 113 of the EC Treaty.

Retail Newsagents

Ms Walley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what factors underlay her decision not to refer the concerns of the retail newsagents to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. [13192]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The decision on whether or not to make a reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission is a matter for the Director General of Fair Trading.

The Director General is considering a number of detailed submissions from interested parties in the industry arguing for and against another reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, and will announce his decision in due course.

Consumer Protection

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects the EC draft directive on consumer protection in the indication of the prices of products offered to consumers to be adopted; and if she will make a statement. [14102]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: This will depend on the rate of progress in the conciliation procedure between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The first meeting of the Conciliation Committee is scheduled for 6 November.

Fibreboard

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will estimate the total volume in each of the last five years of the sales of wood products whose construction involved medium-density fibreboard. [13893]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 3 november 1997]:* No. This information is not available from official statistics.

Photocopier Industry

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to request a further inquiry into the photocopier industry by the Director General of Fair Trading. [13041]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 29 October 1997]:* As I informed the right hon. Member in my letter of 6 October

"My Department has received complaints about current business practices in the industry. These are being passed to the Director General of Fair Trading who will take any decision on whether these complaints relate to general practices in the industry which might require him to reopen his investigation into the photocopying industry, or are against particular consumer credit licence holders and can be addressed under his licensing powers."

Ministerial Interests

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs has advised Copywatch UK not to use his name in promotional literature. [13049]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 29 October 1997]:* Copywatch have never claimed to be an advisor to me in my ministerial role. They previously advised me of malpractices in the photocopying industry as opposition spokesman for consumer affairs.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on what funding provision has been made to accommodate the expenditure needed to resolve the computer millennium problem; and if she expects to have sufficient funding to pay for the work necessary to achieve complete millennium compliance by 1 January 2000. [13584]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The DTI plans to allocate £2.7 million to the resolution of this problem within the core Department. Agencies are pursuing their own programmes of work and have planned their own allocations.

The Department expects to have sufficient funding available to achieve compliance within existing PES provision.

Mr. Malcom Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if she will make a statement. [13582]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The DTI did provide a costed plan for dealing with this problem within the Department to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency by 1 October as requested. Agencies are pursuing their own programmes of work which include the preparation of such plans. Related public bodies have been advised to prepare plans for their own computer systems and officials are seeking confirmation that this work is in hand. Once the costed plans have been analysed by the Central IT Unit and the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will then inform Parliament. The plans will then be available to the public.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when her Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which she is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if she will make a statement. [13585]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The millennium compliance audit within core DTI was completed in October 1996. Chief Executives of next steps agencies and other public bodies are responsible for programmes within their own organisations which include such audits.

European Information Technologies Research Project

Sir Richard Body: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what steps she will take to ensure that the ESPRIT programme of the European Union maintains political impartiality in schools; and if she will make a statement on the experimental schools environment project. [13851]

Mrs. Roche *[holding reply from 30 October 1997]:* The ESPRIT Programme, the European Information Technologies research programme, is impartial in its content and management. All European Union Member States contribute to the development of the Programme's technical scope through a range of technical, industrial and academic experts. The funds are allocated to proposals from collaborative European consortia through a competitive selection process, using published criteria. This process has been designed to avoid any bias whether political, national or commercial. My Department will continue to represent UK interests in the management of the ESPRIT programme, assuring impartiality for all participants. The Experimental Schools Environment is an initiative within ESPRIT, calling for proposals to research new kinds of Information Technology based tools or environments designed to enable new approaches to learning for young children in the age range of 4 to 8 years. Further information is in the ESPRIT Information Pack in the Library of the House.

Coal Mining Industry

Mr. Redwood: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many coal pits have closed since 1 May. [13554]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The closure of two deep mines have been announced since 1 May; Asfordby Colliery in Leicestershire, owned by RJB Mining and Baddesley Drift in Warwickshire, owned by New Baddesley Coal Ltd.

Defence Sales

Sir George Young: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what percentage of export credits has been used to support defence sales since 1994. [13790]

Mrs. Beckett: From data readily available, the information requested is as follows:

Financial year	*Value of ECGD cover provided for defence business as a percentage of total cover*
1994–95	21.4
1995–96	22.9
1996–97	16.3

These figures include all ECGD covered business with defence buyers, including sales of non-lethal equipment.

Sir George Young: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the monetary value of export credit sales used to support defence sales since 1994. [13791]

Mrs. Beckett: From data readily available, the information requested is as follows:

Financial year	*Value of ECGD cover provided for defence business £ million*
1994–95	725
1995–96	1,013
1996–97	384

These figures include all ECGD covered business with defence buyers, including sales of non-lethal equipment.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Supported Housing

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has for consultation on the long-term funding arrangements for supported housing; and if she will make a statement. [14901]

Ms Harman: Securing stable, sustainable long-term funding arrangements for supported housing will take time. The Government are keen to take the views of those working in the field before making any decision. I am therefore setting out our objectives for the long term. These are:

A Government-wide approach

Clarifying responsibilities for controlling, targeting, and prioritising public expenditure on services supporting people in their homes—avoiding gaps and overlaps between budgets

Ensuring the funding system can respond to individuals' needs and enable support to be provided in different types of accommodation and tenures

Avoiding the possibility that accommodation choices may be distorted by the availability and interaction of different funding (this may result from the inter action of demand-led and cash-limited funding streams)

Encouraging coherent and transparent planning, funding and accountability arrangements—at the appropriate level—for support services in the context of wider community care and related programmes

Compatibility with the Government's wider social policy objectives

Encouraging the most cost effective approach across all sectors which takes account of all public expenditure costs; group and wider funding responsibilities, and links with other changes that authorities face

Practicality—identifying solutions that are workable at central and local levels which could be implemented reasonably simply, considering what transitional arrangements might be necessary.

Departmental officials will be contacting over two hundred individuals and organisations who responded to last year's Social Security Advisory Committee consultation. The Committee's report was published last week. We shall now ask respondents for their views on how best to translate these objectives into a modern, practical and sustainable funding system for this valuable social provision. Others who may wish to contribute to the debate are welcome to do so. Representations will be taken up to 5 December 1997.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the policy of her Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if she will make a statement. [13270]

Mr. Field: The Department of Social Security follows the guidance and advice issued to Government departments by HM Treasury. It does not purchase any advice on tax avoidance.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate she has made of the expenditure by *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if she will make a statement. [13269]

Mr. Field: Approximately £10,000 has been spent in 1997–98 by the War Pensions Agency. Consultants were employed to review the procedures used by the Agency to account for VAT. This enabled under-deducted VAT to be identified and resulted in revised procedures being introduced. This will ensure that the Agency correctly reclaims those amounts that are due in future accounting periods within the statutory entitlements.

Inflation (Public Funding)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her estimate of the additional expenditure by her Department, its agencies and other non-departmental public bodies in *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99 as a consequence of higher uprating for inflation than was assumed at the time of the November 1996 Budget; if increases will be financed from the contingency reserve; and if she will make a statement. [13246]

Mr. Field: Higher inflation than expected in the 1996 Budget has no effect on 1997–98 benefit spending. 1998–99 benefit rates will be announced shortly. Increases in line with prices would mean an increase in benefit spending of about £600 million above that assumed in the 1996 Budget. The Government are committed to staying within their overall spending plans.

Index-linked Pensions

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security to which of the retail prices indexes pensions are linked; and on what basis the calculation is made. [13110]

Mr. Denham: We intend to honour our commitment to increase pensions at least in line with prices.

The all items Retail Prices Index for September will be used as a basis to increase Retirement Pension from 6 April 1998. The new rate of benefit will be calculated by uprating the current rate by the increase in the index and rounding the resulting sum to the nearest 5p. The value of the basic pension is being considered as part of our pensions review.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the average time taken by her Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13954]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column *5*.

Information for 1997 is not yet available.

War Pensions

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the review panel looking into war pensions for noise-induced hearing loss will report. [13116]

Mr. Denham: The review of the science of the assessment of noise induced sensorineural hearing loss for the purposes of claims to war pensions is already under way. Sir Kenneth Calman the Government's Chief Medical Officer and the chairman of the review, requested written comments from the team members by 27 October 1997.

A meeting of the team is due to take place on 19 November 1997. The review team will report as soon as possible after that date once they have fully considered the scientific issues under review.

The outcome of the review will be made public.

Goods and Services (Payments)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list each of the functions relating to payment for goods or services supplied for which her Department is responsible indicating the management systems purchased, all sub-contractors involved in the work, co-operative arrangements with other Departments; and the costs of the systems and processes in the last year for which figures are available. [12570]

Mr. Field: The majority of this Department's payments for goods and services are generated via integrated computerised accounting systems, either by bank transfers (CHAPS and BACS) or as system generated payable orders. All invoices are the subject of specific checks and authorisations in accordance with standard Government accounting practice, with responsibilities for verification and certification separated from the actual process of payment.

The Department's primary accounting system is FAMIS (Financial Accounting Management Information System) and amounts due for payment are picked up overnight via the Central Payments Package and issued accordingly. The FAMIS system is based on Millennium software, substantially modified to meet Departmental needs.

The Department does not use sub-contractors for payment work although a number of private companies providing facilities management for Departmental accommodation receive invoices and undertake their initial processing prior to authorisation and payment through Departmental systems. The Department does not

provide payment services to other Government Departments except where it is the major occupier of accommodation, when, under established service agreements, it may meet the initial costs and recover any balance due. The Department does not use payment systems provided by other Government Departments except where it is a minor occupier under the arrangements described above.

A variety of circumstances can apply to individual payments each of which impact on the administrative cost, but high level information collected by the Department indicates that the total administrative cost of making each payment varies between £2.30 and £5.95. The accounts payable and cashier applications which support departmental payments form elements of much wider accounting packages and specific capital and development costs are therefore not readily available.

Means-tested Benefits (Pensioners)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are *(a)* receiving at least one means-tested benefit and not paying income tax, *(b)* not receiving a means-tested benefit and not paying tax, *(c)* not receiving a means-tested benefit and paying tax and *(d)* receiving a means-tested benefit and paying tax; and if she will break down each category into five-year age bands identifying within each age group the number of (i) single male pensioners, (ii) single female pensioners and (iii) married pensioners. [12823]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the tables and is based on estimates for 1997–98 of numbers of pensioner benefit units in each of the groups.

Pensioners receiving a means tested benefit and not paying income tax

000s

	Single male	*Single female*	*Pensioner couples*	*Total*
60–64	90	140	170	400
65–69	80	220	170	480
70–74	80	360	160	600
75–79	70	370	150	590
80 +	120	570	130	820
Total	440	1,660	780	2,880

Pensioners not receiving a means tested benefit and not paying income tax

000s

	Single male	*Single female*	*Pensioner couples*	*Total*
60–64	30	30	110	170
65–69	40	130	270	440
70–74	40	210	310	560
75–79	40	200	200	430
80+	50	310	150	510
Total	200	880	1,040	2,110

Pensioners not receiving a means tested benefit and paying income tax

000s

	Single male	*Single female*	*Pensioner couples*	*Total*
60–64	90	170	840	1,100
65–69	110	140	520	770
70–74	100	160	350	610
75–79	60	100	190	360
80+	80	120	140	340
Total	440	690	2,040	3,170

Pensioners receiving a means tested benefit and paying income tax

000s

	Single male	*Single female*	*Pensioner couples*	*Total*
60–64	10	30	20	70
65–69	10	20	10	40
70–74	20	20	10	40
75–79	10	20	[1]—	30
80+	10	20	[1]—	30
Total	60	110	40	210

Notes:

[1] Less than 5,000.

1. Pensioner benefit units are defined as being any benefit unit containing at least one person aged over 59.
2. Pensioner couples are allocated to age bands according to the age of the oldest partner.
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000.

Source:

1995–96 Family Resources Survey.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will review the system for disability living allowance claimants to ensure claimants are properly informed at each stage of the review process as to the steps they need to take and what they are expected to prove. [12850]

Mr. Denham: We are reviewing all aspects of the Social Security system. One of our key aims is to improve the service provided to claimants and other customers.

The administration of disability living allowance is a matter for Peter Mathison, chief executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Paul Burstow, dated 4 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about servicing the review system for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to ensure claimants are properly informed at each stage of the review process as to the steps they need to take and what they are expected to prove.

The Disability Benefits Directorate (DBD) have no specific proposals to review this system at present. We are, however, always willing to listen and respond to feedback from our customers and representatives as appropriate.

When the DBD receive a request for a review, an acknowledgement is issued to the customer explaining that the department will contact them within 6 weeks. The review request and case papers are passed to an Adjudication Officer (AO) who considers all the evidence available and whether further information is required in order to make a decision. Further information could include clarification of the level of needs arising from the customer's condition and is often obtained by issuing a DLA 434 (Review pack) or asking for information from the GP or Carer.

On receipt of the information the AO will reconsider all of the evidence available and if a decision can be made a notification, informing the customer of the outcome will be issued.

In cases where a decision cannot be made within 6 weeks a review progress letter is issued. The letter advises the customer that the review request will be dealt with as quickly as possible and that the Agency will be in contact again as soon as further information is available.

The Agency is conscious of the need to provide an efficient service to all customers. They are not asked to prove their case but to provide a full and clear picture of their needs in order that the AO can decide the appropriate entitlement.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

DEFENCE

Low Flying

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many hours of operational low flying took place in each of the Borders and Northern Scotland areas in *(a)* the period 1 January to 31 December 1996 and *(b)* the period 1 January to 31 July 1997. [14009]

Mr. Spellar: The numbers of hours of operational low flying (OLF) flown in the Tactical Training Areas (TTAs) are as follows:

	Borders	*Northern Scotland*	*Central Wales*
1 January to 31 December 1996	311	257	61
1 January to 31 July 1997	116	116	19

The figures reflect the measures announced in August 1996 to redistribute the activity more equitably across the three TTAs, in proportion to their areas.

Military Equipment

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on the legality of joint weapons purchases through the West European Armaments Organisation and the Organisme Conjoint de Cooperation en Matière d'Armaments; and if he will make a statement. [13787]

Mr. Spellar: I am aware that questions regarding the legality of these organisations were raised in recent media reports. I have no reason, however, to doubt that the arrangements envisaged are based on a sound legal footing.

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of delivered military equipment between 1993 and 1996. [13788]

Dr. Reid: Statistics relating to payments for delivered equipment, as distinct from payments for work in progress on equipment contracts, are not available centrally. "Defence Statistics 1997", a copy of which is in the Library of the House, shows that total expenditure on equipment, including research and development, over the period was as follows:

1993–94: £9,200 million

1994–95: £8,819 million

1995–96: £8,537 million

1996–97: £8,460 million[1]

[1] Estimate—full details of final outturn are not yet available.

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of offset agreements concluded to support military export sales between 1990 and 1996. [13792]

Mr. Spellar: Most offset agreements are concluded by British companies and the Ministry of Defence does not hold comprehensive records of their value.

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary for Defence what is the value of current military equipment export orders. [13789]

Mr. Spellar: In 1996—the last year for which information is available—British companies won defence export orders worth £5.1 billion.

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the value of offset agreements concluded as a result of United Kingdom purchases of foreign military equipment between 1990 and 1996. [13793]

Mr. Spellar: The value of UK offset, normally referred to as Industrial Participation, agreements concluded as a result of UK purchases of foreign military equipment between 1990 and 1996 is £4.4 billion.

WEU (Weapons Procurement)

Sir George Young: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if further extension of the Western European Union's authority to procure weapons will require renegotiation of the 1948 Brussels treaty. [13786]

Mr. Spellar: No.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13266]

Dr. Reid: The Ministry of Defence does not employ tax advisers for the purpose of tax avoidance. Occasional use is made of tax consultants to advise on compliance with and the implications of tax regulations.

Cash and Running Costs Limits

Mr. Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement of changes to the class 1 cash limits and the Defence operating costs limit for 1997–98. [14187]

Dr. Reid: Following the recent announcement by the Government that the Defence budget for 1997–98 is to be reduced by £168 million on account of overspending its 1996–97 cash limit, the class 1 cash limits will change as follows:

£000s

Class 1 vote	*Current cash limit*	*Change*	*Revised cash limit*
1	10,145,386	–49,256	10,096,130
2	4,806,637	–52,300	4,754,337
3	6,175,530	–63,000	6,112,530
Defence	21,127,553	–164,556	20,962,997

The reduction of £168 million has been offset by £3.444 million to reflect the transfer of PES provision from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Ministry of Defence to meet the costs of the Department's annual subscription to the BBC World Service Monitoring Service on the organisation's move to subscription based funding in 1997–98. The costs fall to vote 1.

The impact of the reduction in the class 1 cash limits on the Defence operating costs limit will be as follows:

£000s

Class 1 vote	Current operating costs limit	Change	Revised operating cost limit
1	10,139,854	-49,256	10,090,598
2	4,806,637	-52,300	4,754,337
3	735,976	—	735,976
Total	15,682,467	-101,556	15,580,911

COPEX

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he plans to accept bookings for future COPEX events to take place on his Department's land. [14215]

Mr. Spellar: My Department would consider any such request on a case-by-case basis. I understand, however, that the 1998 exhibition has already been planned in a non-Defence establishment at Wembley.

Western European Armaments Organisation

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the legal status of the Western European Armaments Organisation. [13901]

Mr. Spellar: The Western European Armaments Organisation (WEAO) was established on 19 November 1996 when the Western European Union (WEU) Council of Ministers, meeting in Ostend, adopted the WEAO Charter, thereby granting the Organisation the status of WEU subsidiary body, in accordance with Article VIII(2) of the Modified Brussels Treaty. The WEAO constitutes an integral part of the WEU and, as such, shares in the legal personality of the WEU.

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the benefits to the United Kingdom of membership of the Western European Armaments Organisation, indicating the partnership projects and the countries with which these are undertaken. [13903]

Mr. Spellar: The Western European Armaments Organisation (WEAO) was established on 19 November 1996. Participants are the 13 nations, including the UK, of the Western European Armaments Group. Since 1 April 1997, the organisation has provided essential support to a pre-existing co-operative defence research programme known as EUCLID (European Co-operation for the Long Term in Defence). The UK is an active member of this programme, currently participating in over 40 co-operative research and technology projects. As yet, no partnerships have been established within the WEAO.

Officer Training Corps

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the membership of the Officer Training Corps in each institution in which it operates. [13757]

Dr. Reid: The number of Officer Cadets, for which each Officer Training Corps (OTC) is established, is shown in the table. The actual number of Officer Cadets fluctuates through the year according to the academic calendar. The OTCs recruit above their established strength at the start of the academic year, to take account of the normal wastage rate, so that actual membership numbers level down to the established figure later in the year.

	Number
Aberdeen	168
Belfast	168
Birmingham	168
Bristol	168
Cambridge	224
East Midlands	168
Edinburgh	168
Exeter	168
Glasgow	168
Leeds	168
Liverpool	168
London	364
Manchester	168
Northumbria	168
Oxford	224
Sheffield	168
Southampton	168
Tayforth	168
Wales	168

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost of the Officer Training Corps in the most recent year for which figures are available. [13758]

Dr. Reid: The total indentifiable cost of the Officer Training Corps (OTC) for Financial Year 1996–97 was £16.7 million, which includes staff and running costs as well as property management of the OTC estate.

Dr. Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what percentage of members of the Officer Training Corps subsequently join the regular forces. [13756]

Dr. Reid: In the academic year 1995–96, the most recent year for which complete figures are available, a total of 260 members of the Officer Training Corps were commissioned into the regular forces. Broken down by Service, one commission was into the Royal Navy, seven into the Royal Marines, 250 into the Army and two into the Royal Air Force. The overall figure of 260 represents approximately 7.5 per cent. of the total Officer Training Corps establishment.

Eurofighter

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the common air defence requirements specified in the European staff requirement for development agreed in 1987 indicating any subsequent amendments. [13861]

Mr. Spellar: The original European Staff Requirement for Development of Eurofighter (ESR-D) was shaped by the context of the cold war, when the requirement was for an aircraft to counter massed raids of bombers under fighter escort. Following a major review, the ESR-D was reissued in January 1994 having been rewritten to reflect the radically changed political and military situation in Europe since 1987. The review took into account the dangers of regional instability, noting that a potential enemy may still have highly capable fighter aircraft; and that Eurofighter still needs to be capable of performing multiple roles on deployed operations. The aircraft offers a significant contribution to our defence capabilities.

Future Large Aircraft

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the numbers of C130Js or future large aircraft required by the Royal Air Force. [13137]

Mr. Spellar: In addition to the 25 C130J already ordered, the FLA Request for Proposal (RFP) is seeking information on orders of 40–50 aircraft to meet our Hercules Rolling Replacement requirement. The Strategic Defence Review is considering our future aircraft requirement, and the final decision on the number of aircraft the UK will buy will depend on the conclusions reached by the review and the responses to the RFP.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his current estimate of the earliest in-service date for a future large aircraft with any European air force. [13138]

Mr. Spellar: The future large aircraft is expected to be available early next century.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the costs to the RAF of maintaining both C130J and FLA transport aircraft in-service simultaneously. [13140]

Mr. Spellar: A preliminary assessment of the costs of meeting our future air transport requirements was made before the Secretary of State for Defence announced on 31 July 1997, *Official Report*, column *466*, that we would join partners in issuing a Request for Proposals for the future large aircraft and would be encouraging our partners to join us in seeking competing bids from other aircraft manufacturers. This assessment indicated that there was merit in exploring the purchase of the future large aircraft to operate alongside C130Js which were ordered in 1994.

We will make a further detailed assessment, which will include an analysis of the costs of in-service support, after we have received the responses to the Request for Proposals and any competing bids. This analysis, and the conclusions of the Strategic Defence Review, will inform the final procurement decision.

RAF Transport Fleet

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will invite tenders for the replacement of the next tranche of the RAF's transport fleet. [13134]

Mr. Spellar: The Request for Proposals was issued on 4 September 1997 to Airbus Industrie, Turkish Aerospace Industries and Alenia on a provisional basis pending the formation of Airbus Military Company (AMC). We are still discussing with partner nations how a competition between AMC and other aircraft manufacturers might be organised.

Hercules C130J Aircraft

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Lockheed Martin has been required to pay compensation for the late delivery of Hercules C130J aircraft. [13142]

Mr. Spellar: The Department will be seeking to claim liquidated damages from the company, which will be used to offset the additional costs incurred by the Department, as they become due.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the current anticipated in-service date of the Hercules C130J. [13141]

Mr. Spellar: On current plans the Department will receive delivery of the first C130J for test and evaluation in the spring of 1998, and the first aircraft is expected to enter service by the end of 1998.

Royal Clarence Yard, Gosport

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is the cost of relocating the activities currently undertaken at the 9.5 acres of land at Royal Clarence yard, Gosport, which are currently scheduled for retention by the Ministry of Defence; [13099]

(2) if his Department will release for sale the 9.5 acres at Royal Clarence yard, Gosport, which is currently occupied as a furniture store. [13098]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the chief executive of the Naval Bases and Supply Agency. I have asked the chief executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from D. J. Stevens to Mr. Peter Viggers, dated 5 November 1997:

I am replying to your two Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence about the release for sale of land at Royal Clarence Yard, Gosport and the cost of relocating the activities, as this falls within my area of responsibility.

The 9.5 acre enclave retained by the MOD within Royal Clarence Yard primarily provides security for the oil pipe and working space to operate and service the facilities on the Oil Fuel Jetty. The waterfront provides essential berthing space for minor vessels while the major jetties within the Naval Base are being refurbished. It is not feasible to relocate these tasks in the area and therefore no figures on costs of relocation are available. In addition, the enclave provides car parking for entitled RN personnel quartered in Gosport but working on the other side of the harbour. The cost effectiveness of this was accepted by Minister (AF) (in the previous administration) as part of the submission to release the major part of the Royal Clarence Yard for sale.

Only 1.4 acres of the enclave are occupied by the furniture store. If this area of the site were released for sale, it is estimated that it would add no more than £300,000 to the sale value of Royal Clarence Yard. The cost of relocating the furniture store on Crown owned land on the Gosport peninsula has been investigated and found to be in excess of £500,000. The alternative of leasing a commercial storage facility in the area is estimated at in excess of £50,000 a year. In the current financial climate neither option would be cost effective for MOD or the taxpayer.

The retained enclave will be the minimum required to meet MOD's needs and if future opportunities were to allow the MOD to relocate any or all of the above facilities in a cost effective manner, further areas would be released for sale.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 6 November

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Radio Channels

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what meetings *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have had with representatives of Children 2000 to discuss the possibility of a children's and schools' radio channel. [13369]

Mr. Fisher: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not held any meetings with representatives of Children 2000. I understand that when they met his officials to discuss the White Paper "The People's Lottery" they set out their plans for a children's and schools' radio channel.

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what plans he has to support the establishment of a children's and schools' radio channel; [13371]

(2) what plans he has to ensure that one of the available digital radio channels on one of the new multiplexes will be devoted to children's and schools' broadcasting. [13370]

Mr. Fisher: My right hon Friend the Secretary of State has no plans to direct the Radio Authority in exercising its statutory responsibility to award independent radio licenses in the UK.

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the technology and planning permission issues have been addressed in respect of the transmission of the available 225kHz channel. [13368]

Mr. Fisher: The Radio Authority is presently considering the feasibility of using 225kHz for independent radio licensing. Any proposals put forward by the Radio Authority would need to be discussed with other countries by the Radiocommunications Agency under the International Telecommunication Union procedures which are designed to ensure that services can co-exist without causing interference with each other.

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he plans to award a national radio franchise on the available 225kHz frequency. [13372]

Mr. Fisher: The award of national radio licences is a matter for the Radio Authority and not for Ministers. The Radio Authority is still considering the technical feasibility of using 225kHz for an independent national service.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Drugs Tsar

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Council what criteria will be applied to assess the efficiency of the work of the Drugs Tsar in respect of *(a)* prisons, *(b)* raves, *(c)* schools and (d) the use of illegal drugs by those who have MS. [13806]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The immediate priorities for Keith Hellawell—the recently appointed UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator—will be to review existing action against drug misuse, and then, as soon as possible, submit proposals to Ministers to develop the strategy to tackle drugs problems through effective enforcement, prevention, education and treatment. In drawing up his proposals, Mr. Hellawell will assess the effectiveness of the work currently being undertaken, which will help focus future efforts against drug misuse. The new strategy will contain objectives against which the Government's progress can be assessed.

TREASURY

VAT (Historic Buildings)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to remove VAT from the repair and maintenance of historic buildings. [14182]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* I have no plans to remove VAT from the repair and maintenance of historic buildings.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of his Department's expenditure on *(a)* tax consultants and *(b)* other external tax advice in (i) 1995–96, (ii) 1996–97 and (iii) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13535]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The Treasury has not sought external tax advice or employed tax consultants in order to reduce the Department's tax payments.

Tax Harmonisation

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on direct tax harmonisation in Europe. [13529]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Direct taxation is a matter for Member States at national level. Proposals for action at the Community level must respect the principles of subsidiarity and unanimity.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussion took place at the most recent ECOFIN meeting about tax harmonisation; and if he will make a statement. [14087]

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the October ECOFIN agreement on a code of conduct for taxation levels in the European Union. [13530]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* I refer to the answer my right hon. Friend the Chancellor gave to my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 3 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *16*.

Public Sector Pay

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reasons he instructed the public sector pay review bodies not to allow their recommendations to be influenced by the headline rate of retail price inflation; and if he will make a statement. [13647]

Mr. Darling: Pay settlements next year must be affordable and will need to take account of our commitment to keep to the existing spending plans. We have asked the pay review bodies to give this priority over other considerations, including headline RPI where the current rate is high in relation to the 2½ per cent. inflation target. Keeping pay settlements under control will help Departments to maintain the delivery of services within their budgets.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether it is the policy of the Government to make a declaration of intent regarding the European Single Currency on 21 November, and if he will make a statement. [13283]

Mr. Gordon Brown: My statement to the House on 27 October set out clearly the Government's position on the European Single Currency.

Tax and Benefits System (Review)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to publish the conclusions of his Review of the Tax and Benefits System; and if he will make a statement. [13290]

Dawn Primarolo: The work of Martin Taylor's task force on tax and benefits will inform my right hon. Friend's next Budget Statement.

Budget

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the date on which he intends to present the Budget in 1998. [13285]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I will present the Budget Statement in the Spring. I will make an announcement of the date in due course.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date he plans to publish his consultative paper on the 1998 Budget; and if he will make a statement. [13289]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I refer to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report,* column *884.*

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to publish the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review; and if he will make a statement. [13288]

Mr. Darling: It is intended to complete the Review in the middle of next year.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to change the present accounting procedures relating to Government loans made to support the introduction of higher education tuition fees in order to distinguish between Government spending and Government lending; and if he will make a statement. [13646]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* A response will be made to the Dearing Inquiry recommendation on the treatment of student loans in due course.

Opencast Operations (Taxation)

Mr. Gunnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has for taxes on opencast coal mining, gravel extraction and limestone quarries in accordance with the polluter pays principle; and how these would be administered. [14282]

Dawn Primarolo: As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his July Budget, work is being carried out on the environmental costs attached to quarrying. The results will inform consideration of whether there is a case for tax or other measures to ensure that these costs are reflected in prices.

Duty-free Sales

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to ensure the continuation of duty free within the EU beyond 30 June 1999. [14288]

Dawn Primarolo: Any extension of intra-EU duty-free sales beyond 30 June 1999 would require a fresh proposal from the European Commission and unanimity amongst all 15 Member States.

Duty-free sales for travel outside the EU will continue after 30 June 1999.

PRIME MINISTER

Market Sensitive Information

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Prime Minister on what occasions the Government have released market sensitive information to a selected individual or individuals and not the market as a whole. [13516]

The Prime Minister: The Government act only in line with long-established practice.

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Prime Minister what is the Government's policy on the release of market sensitive information. [13517]

The Prime Minister: To act in line with long-established practice.

Seal Killing (Russia)

Mr. Howard: To ask the Prime Minister when the letter to the Prime Minister from Mr. Robert Mouland of Folkestone, on the subject of seal pups, dated 30 September 1997, and faxed to the British embassy in Moscow, was shown to him. [14083]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* I have not seen the letter. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office sent a reply on 30 October 1997.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Prime Minister if he raised the killing of baby seals in his recent talks with President Yeltsin. [14081]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* No. The Russian Government are well aware of public concern in the United Kingdom about seal culling. The British embassy in Moscow are in regular contact with the relevant Russian authorities on this matter.

Mr. Bill Gates

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had at his recent meeting with Mr. Bill Gates concerning *(a)* the computer millennium compliance problem and *(b)* other issues; and what was the outcome of these discussions. [14191]

The Prime Minister: I held a constructive meeting with Mr. Gates on 7 October at which a number of issues relating to information and communications technology were discussed, including the Government's proposals for the National Grid for Learning, which I launched that day. Mr. Gates briefly commented on the current status of the computer millennium compliance problem, action in respect of which was announced on 29 September by my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade.

President Yeltsin

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions he had at his recent meetings with President Yeltsin concerning *(a)* the new Russian law on religion and *(b)* other issues; and what was the outcome of these discussions. [14192]

The Prime Minister: I did not discuss the law on freedom of conscience and religious association with President Yeltsin, but the British ambassador in Moscow has been assured by the Russian authorities that implementation of the law will not contravene Russia's international human rights obligations. My discussions in Moscow centred on political and economic reform, international trade issues, bilateral and foreign policy interests and the growing prospects for British business in Russia.

Millennium Projects

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to meet members of the business community to discuss millennium projects. [14245]

The Prime Minister: I am planning to meet members of the business community to discuss the Millennium Experience early in the new year.

Public Appointments

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister how many public appointments he has made since 1 May. [14246]

The Prime Minister: Ten.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what communication he has had with President Mandela since the Commonwealth conference relating to the Lockerbie bombing and the imposition of sanctions against Libya. [14413]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* I have had no communication with President Mandela since the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting.

Australian Prime Minister (Visit)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Prime Minister what subjects were discussed with the Australian Prime Minister when he visited Downing street; and if he will make a statement. [13993]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* Subjects discussed included the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, climate change and a range of other bilateral and international issues.

Indebted Countries

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Prime Minister, further to his statement at the conclusion of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, what criteria will be applied to indebted countries to enable them to write off debts. [13996]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* We are willing to cancel aid debts for those countries who are committed to the internationally agreed development targets, are pursuing good government, are encouraging transparency and bearing down on corruption, and are applying economic policies which benefit the poor and encourage sustainable economic development.

Royal Yacht

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister if he will take steps to ensure that the royal yacht Britannia is made available for visits by residents in Thames boroughs during the vessel's last voyage along the Thames. [14214]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* HMY Britannia will be moored in the Pool of London from 13 to 21 November. During that time a large number of visitors will be invited to attend charitable and other events on board, and the fullest possible access is being arranged for local and national media. This approach, involving maximum use of the yacht for organised visits and events, has been adopted throughout the yacht's final tour of the British Isles; whilst she is still operational it is not safe or practicable to arrange unrestricted access for members of the public. HMY Britannia will sail under floodlight on the evening of 21 November, arriving in Portsmouth the following day to begin de-storing and other preparations for paying-off.

Departmental Regulation

Mr. Steen: To ask the Prime Minister which Ministers are responsible for better regulation in each Government Department. [13963]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has overall responsibility for better regulation matters. However, all Ministers have a responsibility for ensuring good regulatory practice and the avoidance of unnecessary red tape. In order to give this initiative additional focus each Government Department has named a lead Minister responsible for better regulation. These are:

	Department
Brian Wilson MP, Minister of State	Scottish Office
The right hon. the Lord Gilbert, Minister of State	Ministry of Defence
Baroness Margaret Jay, Minister of State	Department of Health
The right hon. Tom Clarke MP, Minister of State	Department for Media, Culture and Sport
Andrew Ingram MP, Minister of State	Northern Ireland Office
Lord Donoughue, Minister of State	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Geoffrey Hoon MP, Parliamentary Secretary	Lord Chancellor's Department
Peter Kilfoyle MP, Parliamentary Secretary	The Office of Public Service
John Denham MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Department of Social Security
Angela Eagle MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Peter Hain MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Welsh Office
George Howarth MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Home Office
Dr. Kim Howells MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Department for Education and Employment
Glenda Jackson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Barbara Roche MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Department of Trade and Industry
Geoffrey Robinson MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State	Her Majesty's Treasury

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Victims and Witnesses

32. **Mr. Ruffley:** To ask the Attorney-General when he last discussed care of victims and witnesses with the Director of Public Prosecutions. [12643]

The Attorney-General: I meet the Director of Public Prosecutions frequently to discuss matters of mutual interest. The CPS is, of course, involved in a number of major interagency initiatives to improve the service to victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system.

Extradition

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Attorney-General what recent advice his Department has given on requests from other countries for extradition of people detained in British prisons. [12642]

The Attorney-General: It is not the practice to disclose such advice or to disclose whether or not advice has been given.

Court of Appeal

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Attorney-General what plans he has to seek an extension of his power to refer sentences to the Court of Appeal for review. [12639]

The Attorney-General: I am in discussion with colleagues about the best way to implement our manifesto commitment to extend my powers to refer cases to the Court of Appeal for review where it appears to me that the sentence is unduly lenient.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Embassies

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the usual days and hours of manning United Kingdom embassies, including provision for answering telephone calls; and if he will make a statement. [13158]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The days and hours UK embassies open for business vary from country to country, according to local custom; details are available from Consular Division within this Department. All embassies operate a duty officer system to deal with emergency telephone calls out of office hours and this Department is always ready to answer queries about embassy services.

European Treaties

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will publish the texts of any declaration, now appended to the treaty of Amsterdam not contained in the version of 16 June, stating for each *(a)* if it was agreed to by a Minister of the Crown at the preceding Inter-Governmental Conference and *(b)* what steps have been taken to publicise it. [13528]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Four Declarations were agreed after the Amsterdam European Council and attached to the draft Final Act of the intergovernmental conference. These are numbers 3, 10, 21 and 45. Three declarations (numbers 14, 40 and 51) were agreed before Amsterdam and were attached to the Final Act subsequently. In addition, there were eight national declarations of which the conference took note. None was made by the UK.

Ministers have agreed the text which was signed at Amsterdam on 2 October, including all declarations attached to the Final Act. All declarations are included in the final texts which have been deposited in the Library of the House and are set out in Cm 3780.

GCHQ

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) how many former employees of GCHQ remain eligible for reinstatement as a result of the Government's decision to restore trade union rights at this establishment; and if he will make a statement; [14100]

(2) how many of those eligible for reinstatement at GCHQ have applied; and how many of those applications were approved. [14101]

Mr. Robin Cook: About 130 staff left GCHQ as a result of the 1984 union ban, of whom 14 were actually dismissed. The remainder fell into various categories—for example, transfer to other Government Departments and early or normal retirement. I informed the House on 19 May of the procedures needed to restore normal trade union rights to the staff of GCHQ and a copy of this statement was sent to those who had been dismissed, together with an invitation to contact GCHQ's Head of Personnel to discuss re-joining on reinstatement terms. It is open to any former civil servant to apply for reinstatement, though there is no right to be reinstated, and applications are considered in terms of existing vacancies and the suitability of an applicant for a particular vacancy. Of the 14 who were dismissed, only seven were still below retirement age by the time initial discussions on the procedure for people to rejoin had taken place; discussions with these have reached varying stages. It is not known how many of the roughly 115 people who were not dismissed but who left GCHQ by other means are still below normal retirement age but GCHQ has received a total of five expressions of interest in reinstatement or transfer back to GCHQ and discussions have again reached varying stages.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many sub-bases of GCHQ are presently maintained in Northern Ireland. [13082]

Mr. Robin Cook: It is long-standing practice not to disclose the details of the operations of the security and intelligence services.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14382]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, on 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many cases of persons missing in Sri Lanka his Department is dealing with; and if he will make a statement. [14099]

Mr. Fatchett: We are currently dealing with two cases of missing persons in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many outstanding replies his Department is waiting for from the Sri Lanka Government with respect to requests for information on missing persons; and what is the average length of time taken for that Government to respond to letters on the subject of missing persons. [14098]

Mr. Fatchett: We have no replies outstanding from the Sri Lankan Government on requests for information on missing persons; on the basis of the two recent cases, the average length of time for the Sri Lankan Government to respond substantively to letters on missing persons is 10 months.

Montserrat

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the circumstances of the citizens of Montserrat. [14297]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The safety of Montserratians is paramount. Scientific advice indicates that the North of the island is relatively safe. We are committed to helping to sustain a viable community there for as long as it is safe to remain. If, however, Montserratians wish, and need help, we shall provide them with financial assistance for them to relocate elsewhere in the Caribbean or the UK.

Antarctic

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received from the British Antarctic Survey on the depletion of the ozone layer over the southern polar regions. [14217]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The British Antarctic Survey (BAS) Meteorological and Ozone Monitoring Unit issues regular bulletins to interested scientists, Government officials and the media. These bulletins and further background information are available on the world wide web from the BAS home page (http://WWW.nbs.ac.uk).

Indonesia

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement indicating the current state of negotiations on the proposed contract for the supply of Land Rovers to Indonesia. [13797]

Mr. Fatchett: Contractual negotiations are a matter for the company concerned.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Court of Appeal

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the report of the Review of the Court of Appeal (Civil Division) will be published; and when the Lord Chancellor expects to respond to it. [15143]

Mr. Hoon: The report of the Review of the Court of Appeal (Civil Division) has been published today and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

I am very grateful to the members of the review, and in particular to Sir Jeffery Bowman for chairing it. The Lord Chancellor is at present considering their conclusions and recommendations and intends to publish a detailed response early in the new year.

Living Wills

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will give people the statutory right to draw up an advance directive setting out their wishes with regard to future medical treatment should they become incapacitated in the future. [13909]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission report on mental incapacity published in 1995 includes recommendations relating to advance statements (sometimes referred to as advance directives). As I indicated in my written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) on 28 October 1997, *Official Report*, column *787*, the Government do not consider that it would be appropriate to legislate on the basis of these recommendations without fresh public consultation. It is hoped that a consultation paper will be issued by the end of the year.

Court Cases (Processing Times)

Mr. Ian Bruce: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the time taken for courts to dispose of cases since May. [12644]

Mr. Hoon: The time taken from first listing to completion for indictable cases in magistrates courts is surveyed by the Department's time intervals survey. The June 1997 survey, the latest from which results are available, reports that the average time from first listing to completion for defendants in indictable cases was 58 days, and 21 and 29 days for defendants in summary non-motoring and summary motoring cases respectively.

For defendants committed to the Crown Court for trial, information is collected on the time from committal to arraignment or start of trial. The average time for defendants over this interval since May 1997 has been as follows: May 1997, 11.79 weeks; June 1997, 11.95 weeks; July 1997, 12.49 weeks; August 1997, 11.74 weeks; and, September 1997, 11.74 weeks.

In the county court and High Court, information on the time taken to deal with cases is recorded each March and September. Results for September 1997 are not yet available.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Haulage Companies

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last met Commissioner Kinnock to discuss EU transport issues; and if he raised the problems United Kingdom lorry drivers and haulage companies face when transporting goods through other EU countries. [13035]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions maintains regular contact with Commissioner Kinnock on a wide range of issues. My right hon. Friend, the Minister of Transport last met Commissioner Kinnock at the Transport Council on 9 October, where the weekend lorry ban imposed by some member states was one of the issues discussed. In addition, my noble Friend, the Minister for Roads, met Commissioner Kinnock on 6 October to discuss a range of road related issues—including freight transport in the EU.

Housing Needs

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into ways in which (i) existing housing stock and (ii) new housing could meet changing household needs better over individual lifespans. [13011]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department has commissioned three relevant studies:

(i) a study has recently been completed on the conversion of local authority housing to meet the changing needs of tenants;

(ii) research has just been commissioned on conversation, demolition and redevelopment, which will examine the potential of converting the existing housing stock of redeveloping sites to meet the increased demand for housing;

(iii) a feasibility study to develop an economic model of the demand and need for social housing has also just been completed;

(iv) a study has recently been completed into the cost implications of extending the building regulations to make new dwellings more accessible to disabled and elderly people.

Since (ii) has just started and (i) and (iii) have recently been completed, the Department has not yet evaluated the outputs from these studies. Evaluation of study (iv) has been taken into account in reaching conclusions on extension of the building regulations, which will be announced shortly.

Climate Change

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about recent negotiations in Bonn on a draft treaty on climate change. [13128]

Angela Eagle: The negotiating meeting in Bonn from 20 to 31 October made slow progress. The UK remains determined to work to ensure a successful outcome at Kyoto. To this end, the Deputy Prime Minister will be chairing an important meeting of developed countries in Tokyo on 8-9 November.

Rail Companies

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to increase the level of scrutiny of the performance of the newly privatised rail companies; and if he will make a statement. [13173]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Ministers have given the Franchising Director new objectives, instructions and guidance under the Railways Act 1993. These require him to maintain a comprehensive and rigorous programme of performance monitoring, and to publish a quarterly bulletin describing the operating performance of franchise operators. Comprehensive monitoring is also carried out to secure compliance with franchise agreements and to operate performance incentive regimes. Passenger Transport Executives carry out additional monitoring of performance within their areas.

The Government intend to strengthen the regulation of the railway in the interests of passengers and to establish a new Strategic Rail Authority. Decisions about what new powers are required, and whether further scrutiny would be appropriate in the future, will be taken within our review of transport policy which will lead to a White Paper next year.

Blood Alcohol Limits

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compliance of the proposal by the European Commission to harmonize and review blood alcohol limits with the obligation of subsidiarity; and if he will make a statement. [13693]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are actively considering the case for changing the UK blood alcohol limit. Our assessment of the European Commission proposals, including the relevance of subsidiarity, will be made in the light of what we conclude is appropriate for drivers in the UK.

Municipal Public Transport

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to restore to local authorities the power to provide municipal public transport; and if he will make a statement. [13694]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no current plans to change the powers of local authorities in this respect but my Department is reviewing all aspects of the provision and regulation of local bus services as part of the development of an integrated transport policy.

Dry Stone Walls

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information his Department has collated on the rate of destruction of dry stone walls. [14396]

Angela Eagle: The latest information on national losses of dry stone walls is derived from Countryside Survey 1990. This estimated that the total length of dry stone walls in Great Britain was 191,000 km in 1990, and that the overall length of dry stone walls had decreased by about 10 per cent. since 1984.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure the protection and good maintenance of dry stone walls in upland rural areas. [14398]

Angela Eagle: I refer to the replies I gave to my hon. Friend on 9 July 1997, *Official Report*, column *495*, which described the grant assistance available from the Government and powers available to local authorities and National Parks for the protection and maintenance of dry stone walls.

Helen Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated to determine the effect on the biodiversity of the countryside and upland areas of the dismantling of dry stone walls. [14397]

Angela Eagle: My Department has not commissioned any such research. We are not aware of any directly relevant research on this subject, although the results of Countryside Survey 1990 showed that linear features in general were an important source of botanical diversity in the countryside.

Rural England White Paper

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the Government have to review the long-term policy proposals set out in the 1995 Rural England White Paper; and if he will make a statement. [14298]

Angela Eagle: The Government are committed to developing an integrated approach to tackling the problems of rural areas. Current policies and programmes are being reviewed as part of the Government's comprehensive spending reviews; notably the Countryside and Rural Policy spending review, conducted jointly by my Department and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Sewage

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the level of untreated sewage discharge released by storms or flash floods. [14036]

Angela Eagle: Sewerage systems are designed to handle the expected normal sewage load through continuous, controlled and treated discharges. Combined sewer overflows (CSOs) operate when this predetermined level is exceeded as a result of rainfall run-off entering the sewer. The sewage will be considerably diluted by the rainwater causing the overflow.

Except in areas of exceptionally high amenity value, these CSOs are not routinely monitored, so it is not possible to estimate the level of untreated sewage discharged in this way. However the design and construction of new and refurbished storm water overflows are controlled on a site specific basis by the Environment Agency on the principle that the frequency of discharge should be related to the dilution available and the uses made of the receiving water.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what was the level of sewage leakage for each of the water companies in the last year for which figures are available; [14035]

(2) what plans the Government have to implement targets for a decrease in sewage leakage. [14037]

Angela Eagle: Leakage from sewers cannot be measured in any meaningful way and there are no plans at present to set sewage leakage targets. However, information on the condition and serviceability of assets was collected by the Director General at the last periodic review. Only 3 per cent. of critical sewers and 2 per cent. of non-critical sewers were in the worst condition grade. The Director General has asked companies to report on the state of their sewers in the asset inventory and serviceability return to Ofwat next summer, as part of the periodic review process.

Car of Tomorrow Project

Mr. MacGregor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to implement the recommendations contained in the Twentieth report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution in respect of the United Kingdom's funding for the European Commission's Car of Tomorrow project. [14423]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are committed to working in partnership with industry to develop and promote less polluting vehicles, as demonstrated by yesterday's announcement by my hon. Friend the Minister for Science, Energy and Industry, at the launch of the Foresight Vehicle LINK programme. The Government will continue to attach considerable importance to the potential contribution that European research and development can make to the development of cleaner vehicles as it discusses the make-up of the fifth framework programme with the European Commission.

Leasehold Valuation Tribunal

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to investigate the speed with which cases are processed through the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal; and if he will make a statement. [14095]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department is working with the Presidents of the Tribunals to minimise delays in the procedures which are within their control. I understand that the West Midland Leasehold Valuation Tribunal typically issues decisions within a month of the hearing. My hon. Friend may, however, have in mind three cases relating to properties in Redditch which were heard in June. These are unusually important and sensitive cases on which the tribunal has found it necessary to deliberate at considerable length. It hopes to be able to issue its decisions later this month.

County Structure Plans

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which draft county structure plans the Government office for each region has *(a)* responded to and *(b)* commented on since 1 May. [14076]

Mr. Raynsford: Since 1 May 1977, formal interventions have been made by Government Offices on behalf of the Secretary of State in respect of the deposited County Durham structure plan (objection submitted by Government Office for the North East) and the Cornwall structure plan (withdrawal of direction not to adopt by the Government Office for the South West).

In addition, comments have been submitted by Government Offices in respect of the reviews of the following structure plans:

	County
Government Office for the West Midlands	Shropshire Staffordshire Warwickshire
Government Office for the Eastern Region	Essex
Government Office for the South East	Oxfordshire

More generally, Government Offices maintain ongoing discussions with all structure planning authorities in their areas.

Lighting Systems

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to legislate for the control of light pollution from domestic and commercial security lighting systems and general floodlighting systems. [14013]

Angela Eagle: The Government believe that any problems caused by such lighting are best dealt with by raising public awareness and by providing guidance on how these problems might be avoided.

My Department, in conjunction with the Countryside Commission, has recently published a good practice guide, "Lighting in the Countryside", which provides advice to local authorities, developers, professionals and members of the public on the effects of lighting and how best to minimise its intrusiveness. Much of the advice it contains is equally applicable to urban areas.

Other wider concerns about light pollution are being considered by my officials. Any decisions on action will be taken once their work is complete.

Bridge Strengthening

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has undertaken to assess how

many bridges, owned by local authorities, will need strengthening in order to meet the requirements under directive 85/3/EC. [14194]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department regularly monitors progress made by local authorities in implementing the programme of bridge assessment and strengthening, initiated in 1987.

Rural Economy

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review planning policy guidance to facilitate increased job creation in the rural economy. [14177]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government's planning policy for rural areas is contained in Planning Policy Guidance note (PPG)7 which was revised in February 1997. This reaffirms that the guiding principle in the countryside should be that development should both benefit economic activity and maintain or enhance the environment.

The revised PPG7 encourages business diversification and allows for greater discrimination in favour of re-use of rural buildings for business rather than for residential purposes.

It also makes it clear that the range of industries which can be successfully located in rural areas, without causing unacceptable disturbance, is expanding. It advises local authorities to make provision for commercial development in their local plans, and gives greater encouragement to, and guidance on, development proposals for agricultural diversification.

We have no plans to review PPG7.

Public Appointments

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many public appointments he has made since 1 May. [14244]

Angela Eagle: The Secretary of State has made the following appointments to non-departmental public bodies and nationalised industries sponsored by the Department since 1 May.

	Number
NDPBs:	
Executive	42
Advisory	30
Tribunals	59
Nationalised Industries	2
Total	133

The Secretary of State also makes appointments to various small, mainly local, public bodies and other miscellaneous appointments. Details of these appointments are not held centrally.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14381]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster yesterday, 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Contaminated Land

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further legislative steps he plans in order to deal with radioactively contaminated land. [14360]

Angela Eagle: The Environment Act 1995 contained powers to establish regimes for both radioactively, and non-radioactively, contaminated land by secondary legislation. The Government are considering how best to apply the provisions of this Act, and we expect to make an announcement shortly.

Planning

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to require the obtaining of planning permission for the erection of all telephone and radio masts. [14012]

Mr. Raynsford: The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 grants a general planning permission for certain telecommunications masts providing:

- the mast is erected by a telecommunications code system operator licensed by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry under the Telecommunications Act 1984;
- the mast does not exceed 15m in height;
- the mast is not erected in a National Park, area of outstanding natural beauty, conservation area, or the Broads; and
- the mast is not refused prior approval by the local planning authority within the period allowed under the Order. The authority must be given the opportunity to say whether they wish to approve, within 28 days, details of the mast's siting and appearance. The authority may refuse approval if they consider there to be a serious threat to amenity.

A full application for planning permission is normally required for any mast which does not meet these criteria. There are no current plans to amend the regulations in this respect.

Mrs. Ann Cryer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans she has to change the current guidance, in Policy Planning Guidance and the Town and Country Planning Acts, in respect of their presumption in favour of development. [14358]

Mr. Raynsford: Section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 requires a planning application to be determined in accordance with the adopted development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. As explained in PPG1, this establishes a presumption in favour of proposals that conform to the prevailing development plan, rather than a general presumption in favour of development. The Government have no plans to change this "plan-led" system. Any changes to Planning Policy Guidance or Minerals Planning Guidance will be announced in the normal way.

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to include crime statistics as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications relating to change of use. [14176]

Mr. Raynsford: DoE Circular 5/94, "Planning Out Crime", advises that crime prevention is capable of being a material consideration when planning applications are considered. As with other material considerations, the weight that is given to it will depend on the individual circumstances of the case. Crime statistics may be useful in making this assessment.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to amend the Planning Regulations so that public houses and hot food takeaway premises do not fall within the same use class; and if he will make a statement. [14014]

Mr. Raynsford: The Use Classes Order 1987 groups together various types of land use because, in planning terms, they have a similar impact on a neighbourhood. As public houses and hot food takeaway premises tend to raise the same land use issues, they are both included within Use Class A3, the Food and Drink Class. There are no plans to amend this class, although we keep the arrangements under review.

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to remove permitted development rights and same category use rights from the privatised utilities and public bodies for buildings or land which formerly had the benefit of Crown immunity, but have subsequently ceased to be used in full or part for the original purpose, and to require the submission of planning applications for any changes of use which have been implemented or planned since privatisation. [14032]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no plans to remove permitted development rights or same Use Class rights from privatised utilities or public bodies. Last year my Department commissioned research to establish the extent to which statutory undertakers rely on permitted development rights and to consider whether any changes are needed. The research project is now complete and we are considering the findings.

Driving Licences

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to change the licensing regulations for older motorists. [14203]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are no plans at present to change the present arrangements. Those aged 70 and over may renew their driving licences for periods of up to three years subject to satisfying the health requirements. All drivers are under a statutory obligation to notify the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency of any relevant disability from which they suffer.

Road Schemes

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the road schemes by each local authority which make up the existing commitments in the local transport settlement 1997–98, indicating for each *(a)* the total costs and *(b)* whether contracts have been entered into between local authorities and construction firms. [14195]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The schemes which are being supported in 1997–98 are listed in the table. Information on contracts could not be provided except at disproportionate cost.

Authority	*School name*	*Total cost £000*
Bexley	A201 Erith-Thamesmead Spine Road (phase IV)	33,339
Enfield	A110 Nags Head Road/High Street Ponders End	4,857
Greenwich	A206 Woolwich Road/improvements	24,159
Harrow	A409 Wealdstone bypass	16,517
Harrow	A409 Sheepcote Road widening for two-way traffic	2,905
Hillingdon	A402 Uxbridge Town Centre improvements	2,281
Hounslow	A315 Hounslow Town Centre-Urban Relief Road	10,885
Kensington and Chelsea	A404 Harrow Road Junction/Ladbroke Grove Canal Bridge	9,171
Kingston	A240 North-South Strategy-A240 Corridor improvements	4,494
Newham	A117 East Ham Town Centre Relief Road/pedestrianisation	13,864
Newham	A11 Stratford Gyratory modifications	3,756
Westminster	A404 Harrow Road/Ladbroke Grove widening	4,398
Manchester	A601 Intermediate Ring Road stage 2	44,072
Oldham	A62 A62/A627 Oldham Way improvements	5,850
Salford	A506 Trafford Road (The Quays-White City)	20,782
Trafford	A56 City Link/White City interchange	36,721
Trafford	A506 Trafford Road improvements	23,952
Knowsley	A530 Link Road M57 to A562	47,334
Sefton	A59 Aintree Park Lane improvements	3,300
Wirral	A502 Birkenhead Freeport route	4,687
Barnsley	A619 Dearne Towns link road	39,510
Doncaster	A630 Wheatley Hall road	8,608
Sheffield	A610 Outer Ring road (Darnall) stages II, III & IV	20,669
Newcastle upon Tyne	A608 West Central route	20,996
Birmingham	A512 Lichfield Road improvements phase 1	19,004
Birmingham	A47 Heartlands Spine Road Phase 3	26,004
Birmingham	A47 Heartlands Spine road phase 2	58,220
Birmingham	A34/A435 South Birmingham improvements phase 1	3,548
Coventry	A444 North-South road phase 1	22,586
Coventry	A444 North-South road phase 2	22,270
Dudley	A461 Dudley Southern bypass	55,000
Sandwell	A403 Churchbridge improvements Sandwell	3,840
Solihull	A45 West Midlands Renaissance Area improvements	18,528
Wolverhampton	A412 Wednesfield Bypass and Industrial Access	25,325
Leeds	Leeds inner ring road stages 6 and 7	78,821
Leeds	Leeds City Centre Loop phase 3	8,079
Wakefield	A628 Hemsworth bypass	10,161
Redcar and Cleveland	A174 Skelton and Brotton bypass	12,260
Stockton on Tees	A104 Portrack land dualling	7,791
Kingston upon Hull	A103 Ennerdale link road	30,487
North East Lincolnshire	A16 Grimsby Peakes parkway	25,048
York	B1228 Peasholme Green Bridge	4,728
Peterborough	A415 Werrington to Glinton phase 2	9,578
Buckinghamshire	A413 Wendover bypass	13,971
Buckinghamshire	A421 Tingewick bypass	12,802
Cheshire	A533 Davenham bypass	18,150
Cheshire	A534 Wheelock bypass	11,548
Cheshire	Chester park and ride phase 2	6,847
Cornwall	A39 Trispen bypass and A30 link	6,050
Cumbria	A595 Dalton in Furness to Askam in Furness improvements	4,618

Authority	School name	Total cost £000
Derbyshire	A6 London road diversion	14,595
Dorset	A37 improvements	8,869
East Sussex	A22 New route (Dittons to seaside) Eastbourne	27,866
Gloucestershire	A430 Gloucester south west bypass	22,290
Hampshire	A331 Blackwater valley route (centre section)	39,338
Hampshire	A325 Woolmer link road	2,803
Hertfordshire	A121 Cheshunt link road	16,297
Kent	A299 Thanet way dualling Sections 1–7A)	184,605
Kent	A206 South Thames-side development route stage 1	20,850
Kent	A228 Hale street bypass	10,400
Kent	A256 Whitfield to Eastry/Whitfield bypass	37,770
Kent	A28 A20 Barracks link Ashford	3,950
Kent	A226 South Thames side development route stage 4	18,354
Kent	A289 Wainscott northern bypass	58,071
Lancashire	A6 South Ribble: M65 Interface improvements	12,727
Lincolnshire	A57 Lincoln: Ropewalk to Carholme road. improvements	11,090
Lincolnshire	A15/1 Market Deeping bypass	10,561
Northamptonshire	A605 Warmington bypass and Tansor improvements	4,810
Northumberland	A189 North Seaton duplication stage I	10,645
Nottinghamshire	A609 Awsworth and Cossall bypass	4,821
Nottinghamshire	A611 Mansfield eastern outer ring road (phase 2)	3,007
Nottinghamshire	A608 M1 to A611 improvement Annesley	5,099
Oxfordshire	B403 improvements between A421 Tingewick and A43	6,073
Somerset	A39 Wells Relief road	14,163
Somerset	A37 Yeovil to Dorset boundary phase 1	5,813
Staffordshire	A50 Uttoxeter town centre bypass phases I and II	17,224
Staffordshire	A527 Tunstall western bypass phases I and II	23,788
Surrey	A331 Blackwater valley route (Aldershot road-Lynchford road)	78,586
West Sussex	A230 Burgess Hill link road	6,032
Worcestershire	A44 Broadway bypass	8,405
Worcestershire	A422 Worcester Western bypass and link roads	13,770

Rural Transport

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* new and *(b)* existing rural packages which have been submitted by local authorities in their Transport Policies and Programmes for 1998–99 and the amount bid for in each. [14193]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The packages which are targeted substantially on rural areas are:

Local authority	Package	1998–99 bid £000s
(a) New		
Kent CC	Romney Marsh	375
Surrey CC	STAR2	502
West Sussex CC	SCRIPT Telematics Rural	240
Devon CC	Rural	220
Cumbria CC	Lake District	640
North Yorkshire CC	North York Moors	193
North Yorkshire CC	Yorkshire Dales	203
Suffolk CC	Rural	400
(b) Existing		
East Sussex CC	Ashdown Forest	400
Hampshire CC	New Forest	500
Cornwall CC	Falmouth	907
Devon CC	Dartmoor	329
Derbyshire CC	Hope/Derwent	322

Air Safety

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what further steps will be taken to review flight paths and container safety standards in respect of the transport of mixed oxide fuel by air. [14285]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am satisfied with current operational procedures which require that such flights should be made over water as far as possible, avoiding large conurbations.

Container safety standards for the transport of radioactive material are kept under continuous review by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and made mandatory for air transport when incorporated into the International Civil Aviation Organization's *Technical Instructions for the Safe Transport of Dangerous Goods by Air.* The UK will continue to contribute to future regulatory developments through both the IAEA and the International Civil Aviation Organisation.

Local Authority Capital Receipts

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to relax the current controls on local authorities re-investing their non-housing capital receipts. [14027]

Mr. Raynsford: The Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Act 1997, which has just come into force, will enable Ministers to take account of most receipts set aside by local authorities for debt repayment in determining amounts of supplementary credit approvals. The measure will allow the additional resources we have made available under our housing capital receipts initiative to be distributed to local authorities taking account of historically generated housing capital receipts, as well as need. The Government's immediate priority is for a housing initiative to get extra resources into tackling the backlog of housing need. We have no plans at present for a similar initiative for other services.

National Parks and Marine Reserves

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to establish new *(a)* national parks and *(b)* marine nature reserves; and if he will make a statement. [13684]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The designation of new National Parks in England is the responsibility of the Countryside Commission, subject to confirmation by the Secretary of State. The Countryside Commission proposes to bring together the results of current work on landscape designated areas next spring. Its report to Ministers will include advice on whether National Park status might be effective and appropriate for any areas where the landscape may be considered in need of greater protection.

There are no plans to establish any new Marine Nature Reserves in England.

The designation of National Parks and Marine Nature Reserves in Wales is a matter for the Secretary of State for Wales.

Channel Tunnel

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to ensure that the environmental protection measures in the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996 are adhered to. [14554]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London and Continental Railways are contractually obliged to the Government to comply with the Environmental Minimum Requirements provided for under the Channel Tunnel Rail Link development agreement. These include a range of planning, environmental and heritage memoranda and agreements with local authorities and statutory environmental bodies, and the various undertakings and assurances given during the passage of the CTRL Act.

Footpaths and Byways

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of designated footpaths and byways exist in England and Wales. [14613]

Angela Eagle: In 1994, the last survey of rights of way in England indicated that there were 82,025 miles of footpaths and 1,864 miles of byways open to all traffic recorded under the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. A similar survey in Wales carried out in 1994–95 indicated that there were 19,441 miles of footpaths and 404 miles of byways.

In addition, there were also estimated to be 18,021 miles of bridleways in England and 3,440 miles in Wales, and 3,107 miles of roads used as public paths in England and 1,485 miles in Wales.

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to assist the re-establishment of ancient bridleways. [14179]

Angela Eagle: Local authorities are responsible for recording bridleways and ensuring that they are open and free from obstructions. They also have powers to create bridleways by agreement or order. With our statutory advisers, the Countryside Commission, we shall encourage authorities to make good use of their powers. As part of the Government's comprehensive spending review, we shall be considering the balance of expenditure between different recreational activities.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will receive deputations from local authorities in England to discuss this year's provisional local authority grant settlement. [14617]

Ms Armstrong: I am keen to ensure that we hear the views of those authorities that have constructive points to make on the settlement, whether in writing, face to face or otherwise. I am currently looking into the possibility of using local video-conferencing facilities to meet with local authorities. This could save some local authority delegations from having to incur the expense and time that would be involved in travelling to London.

BSE

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidelines his Department issues to those handling tissue from the nervous system of cows infected with BSE; and if he will make a statement. [13805]

Angela Eagle: Occupational exposure to the agent BSE in nervous tissue may occur during work in research laboratories, post mortem rooms and during the slaughter and disposal of infected cattle. In view of the uncertainty about the risks from BSE, prudent and precautionary worker safety measures have been recommended since 1989. Guidance has been prepared on behalf of the Health and Safety Commission, the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food by the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens (ACDP).

Guidance from ACDP on the health and safety requirements for laboratory and post mortem workers was published in 1994. It recommends the use of special containment conditions, safety equipment and decontamination measures for all work with BSE. General ACDP guidance for other occupational groups was published in August 1996. It recommends the maintenance of high standards of occupational hygiene when working with cattle and new methods of working to avoid or minimise exposure to tissues of cattle that may carry the agent of BSE infectivity. Copies have been deposited in the House of Commons Library.

Recent evidence on the link between BSE and the new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (nvCJD) in humans means that BSE must now be considered a biological agent (human pathogen) within the meaning of the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 1994. ACDP have advised that to date there is no evidence of occupational transmission of either BSE or CJD and that none of the cases of nvCJD has any obvious link with occupational exposure to BSE. ACDP consider that the existing published guidance on BSE continues to provide adequate control. The 1994 guidance is being revised and updated in any event and will be published early in 1998.

Passenger Railway Services

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Franchising Director plans to publish his criteria for the appraisal of passenger railway services. [14616]

Dr. Strang: The Franchising Director has today published "Appraisal of Support for Passenger Rail Services—Planning Criteria: An Interim Guide", which sets out the basis on which he intends to appraise the costs and benefits of new passenger rail investment and changes in service levels. I have approved these criteria on an interim basis, and instructed the Franchising Director to

keep them under review, revising the criteria as necessary in the light of the wider review of economic appraisal being undertaken as part of the Government's integrated transport strategy. Copies of the criteria have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Genetically Modified Maize

Mr. Dewson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy in the European Council to support those member states of the European Community which have banned genetically modified maize. [14558]

Angela Eagle: At the Article 21 Committee on 5 November, Austria requested that the vote on the Commission proposal to require Austria and Luxembourg to repeal their bans on GM maize be postponed. The United Kingdom delegation, among others, supported the Austrian request, and consideration of the Commission's proposal has been deferred until the next meeting of the Article 21 Committee, in about two months time. In the meantime it is expected that the Commission will endeavour to find compromise wording for the proposal and the Government will consider its position in the light of these developments.

Franchising Director

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to issue new objectives, instructions and guidance to the Rail Franchising Director. [14614]

Dr Strang: I have today written to the Franchising Director, enclosing a new set of Objectives, Instructions and Guidance, issued to him under section 5 of the Railways Act 1993. Copies of my letter and of the Objectives, Instructions and Guidance have been laid before the House and also placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Coastguard

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on coastguard provision in the Solent/Spithead area. [14684]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Coastguard agency, Mr. C. J. Harris, to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Letter from Mr. C. J. Harris to Mr. Peter Viggers, dated 6 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent Question about Coastguard provision in the Solent/Spithead area.

The Coastguard District of Solent is part of the Southern Coastguard Search and Rescue Region, and comprises a Maritime Rescue Sub Centre at Lee-on-Solent along with Coastguard Sector Managers at Portsmouth, South Downs (Littlehampton), Southampton and the Isle of Wight who are responsible for Auxiliary Coastguard Response Teams trained in cliff and mud rescue and coastal search techniques. These teams are located at Havant, Hayling Island, Portsmouth, Selsey, Birling Gap, Brighton, Littlehampton, Newhaven, Shoreham, Hillhead, Lymington, Southampton, Bembridge, Needles, Newport, Ryde and Ventnor, plus two Coastguard patrol boats (based at Hayling Island and Southampton). Coastguard facilities within the Solent District are completed by a contract rescue helicopter based at Lee-on-Solent and other search and rescue organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and Solent Sea Rescue Organisation.

Rail Regulation

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to improve the regulation of the rail industry. [14615]

Dr. Strang: I have today signed a voluntary Concordat with the independent Rail Regulator which provides a framework for better regulation of the railways. The Concordat includes a statement of the Government's objectives for the rail industry, the Rail Regulator's aims and objectives, and a framework for communication between Ministers, the Franchising Director and the Rail Regulator. Copies of the Concordat have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Fire Service

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who is to be the next Chief Inspector of Fire Services. [15140]

Mr. Straw: Mr. Graham Meldrum CBE, the Chief Fire Officer of the West Midlands Fire Service, will become Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Fire Services in succession to Sir Bryan Collins OBE, who retires on 31 December.

Surveillance Systems

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to alter the draft code of practice on intrusive surveillance to *(a)* ensure equal rights for tenants as for property owners and *(b)* include a definition of urgency; and if he will make a statement. [13710]

Mr. Michael: We have received more than 60 responses to the public consultation exercise on the draft code of practice. Both of the issues raised by the right hon. Member were raised by respondees and are receiving careful consideration, along with other matters raised during the consultation process. We will table a revised draft when that consideration has been completed.

Animals (Scientific Procedures)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to record the number of animals *(a)* bred and *(b)* killed purely for body parts and tissue use in UK laboratories; and if he will make a statement; [13800]

(2) what estimates he has made of the number of animals which have been *(a)* bred and *(b)* killed in UK laboratories purely for body parts and tissue use in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [13799]

Mr. George Howarth: The Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 regulates the use of living animals in scientific procedures.

Killing animals by humane methods does not necessarily require licence authority under the Act and does not always need to be carried out in establishments designated under sections 6 or 7 of the 1986 Act. The Home Office cannot therefore collate, or even estimate, the number of animals bred and killed purely for body parts or tissue.

Fundamental changes to the Act would be needed if statistics of this nature were to be collected and there are no plans to make any such changes.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department plans to publish the revised *(a)* "Guidance on the Operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986" and *(b)* "Code of Practice for the Housing and Care of Animals Used in Scientific Procedures". [13643]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* Work has already commenced on updating the "Guidance on the Operation of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986". The revisions will, in part, depend upon exactly how we implement a number of the planned changes to the operation of the Act, including those recommended by the Animal Procedures Committee in its interim report on the review of the Act. A firm publication date cannot therefore be given at this stage.

Work on the "Code of Practice for the Housing and Care of Animals Used in Scientific Procedures" will follow the revision of the Guidance. This will allow us to ensure that any changes made take full account of changes being made in Europe. The Council of Europe is currently setting up working groups to review Appendix A of the European Convention for the Protection of Vertebrate Animals used for Experimental and other Scientific Purposes, ETS 123. This Appendix sets out guidelines on the care and accommodation of laboratory animals.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much his Department has spent on funding the Home Office Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate in each of the last five years; what is the projected expenditure for each of the next two years; and if he will make a statement. [13638]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* In the last five years, *(a)* the pay budget and *(b)* the travel and subsistence budget for the Inspectorate have been as follows:

	(a) £	*(b)* £
1993–94	1,037,000	140,000
1994–95	1,031,000	102,000
1995–96	991,000	112,000
1996–97	1,047,000	129,000
1997–98	1,033,000	135,000

Budgets for 1998–99 and for 1999–2000 have not yet been finalised, but an increase to cover two or three new inspectors has been agreed.

Accommodation and other running costs are funded jointly with the administrative unit which operates the licensing system. They cannot easily be separated.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how much has been spent by his Department on work to find alternatives to the use of animals in scientific procedures in each of the last five years; what is the projected expenditure for each of the next two years; and if he will make a statement; [13677]

(2) what assessment he has made of section 62 of the report of the Animal Procedures Committee for 1996; and if he will make a statement. [13681]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* During the past five years, the budget made available to the Animal Procedures Committee to sponsor research to reduce, refine or replace animal experimentation has been as follows:

1993–94: £308,000

1994–95: £273,000

1995–96: £253,000

1996–97: £242,000

1997–98: £182,000.

Paragraph 62 of the Committee's annual report repeats the Committee's concern about the reduction in the 1996–97 budget and says that the Committee was

"extremely annoyed to find that the budget for 1997–98 would be reduced by another £60,000".

Both these reductions were made under the previous Government.

The budgets for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 have not yet been finalised, but I hope to see an increase.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* inspectors and *(b)* administrative staff are employed (i) full time and (ii) part time as part of the Home Office Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate. [13637]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* Since June, three new Inspectors have been appointed to restore the complement of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate to 18 full-time inspectors and one full-time personal secretary. We have secured additional funding from next year for another two or three inspectors.

In addition, there are 11 full-time and six part-time administrative staff in a separate unit which operates the licensing system.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date the ban on the use of animals in the testing and development of weapons will come into force; and if he will make a statement. [13676]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* No animals are being used to develop weapons. Animals can be used, however, to test and develop means of protecting United Kingdom service men and women against terrorist and battlefield weapons and to improve treatments. I have no plans, at this time, to ban such use.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce compulsory training programmes for scientists and technicians killing animals by methods outlined in Schedule 1 to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [13640]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* We have accepted a recommendation made by the Animal Procedures Committee in its interim report on the review of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 that all those killing animals by Schedule 1 methods should be trained and competent to do so.

We will be consulting the Institute of Biology, the Universities Group for the Accreditation of Training and other relevant bodies to develop a suitable training scheme. We then propose to add conditions to all Certificates of Designation to require establishments to maintain lists of all those who have been trained and are competent to kill animals by specified Schedule 1 methods.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to introduce compulsory training programme for certificate holders in respect of the specific responsibilities they hold under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; [13639]

(2) on what date he plans to meet certificate holders under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 to discuss specific problems and best practice relating to the Act. [13641]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* In their interim report on the review of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, the Committee recommended that

"training be developed to assist Certificate holders in carrying out the specific responsibilities they hold under the 1986 Act"

and that

"the Home Office arrange a meeting of certificate holders to consider specific problems and best practices".

We have accepted these recommendations.

The Animal Procedures Committee had previously recommended that all new applicants for Certificates of Designation should attend module 1 of an accredited training programme. This has already been implemented. We will now be consulting with the Institute of Biology, the Universities Group for the Accreditation of Training and other relevant bodies to develop additional training for Certificate holders.

No date has yet been set for a meeting of Certificate holders, but informal discussions have already been held with several Certificate holders at both Ministerial and official level.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Depar ent when his Department plans to publish the procedures by which infringements of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 are handled; and if he will make a statement. [13642]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* These have already been published in paragraphs 135 to 140 and in Appendix D to the 1986 annual report of the Animal Procedures Committee.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans his Department has to ban the LD50 test; and if he will make a statement. [13675]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* Regulators, both national and international, still require that LD50 tests be carried out in certain circumstances to ensure that products are safe to the consumer and to those involved in their manufacture and transport. A unilateral ban on the LD50 test would, at this stage, result in these tests being carried out in other countries, many of which have less rigorous controls on animal tests and less regard for animal welfare. Even if it could be maintained under current legislation, such a ban would also seriously disadvantage United Kingdom industry.

The Government are instead pressing regulators to dispense with the need for the LD50 test.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the members of the Animal Procedures Committee who have held a licence under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 *(a)* during the last six years and *(b)* ever. [13680]

Mr. George Howarth *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* Section 19(3) of the Act requires that, other than the Chairman, at least half of the members of the Animal Procedures Committee shall

"neither hold nor within the previous six years have held any licence"

under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 or its predecessor, the Cruelty to Animals Act 1876.

The members of the Committee who currently hold or have held within the past six years either a project or personal licence under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 are as follows:

Professor Ronald Anderson

Professor Barry Bridges

Professor Fiona Broughton Popkin

Professor Paul Flecknell

Mr. John Gregory

Professor Susan Iversen

Professor Michael Spyer.

In addition, Mrs. Judy MacArthur Clark and Dr. Anthony Suckling have held licences under the Act, but not during the last six years.

Two more members, Dr. Southee and Dr. Purchase, held licences before 1987 under the Cruelty to Animals Act 1876.

All members of the Committee are appointed because of their commitment to animal welfare. We intend to make a number of new appointments shortly and to increase the number of members with animal welfare expertise.

Racial Harassment

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to make racial harassment and violence a specific offence; and if he will make a statement. [14437]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government intend to introduce new offences of racial harassment and violence in the Crime and Disorder Bill. These measures will send out a strong message to society that such crime is unacceptable and will be dealt with seriously by the courts. A consultation document setting out in detail the Government's proposals was issued on 2 October. We are now considering the responses.

Strip Search Review

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 15 July 1997, *Official Report*, column *98*, what is the target date for completion of the review of strip searching procedures. [13087]

Ms Quin: We expect the review to have been completed by the end of January 1998.

Learning Difficulties

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to issue guidance to the police, Crown Prosecution Service and other relevant professional groups on dealing with cases of alleged crimes against people with learning difficulties; and if he will make a statement. [13736]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The Government are concerned about the plight of vulnerable witnesses, including those with learning difficulties, and believe that more needs to be done.

That is why on 13 June I announced an urgent, wide-ranging review of the way in which vulnerable or intimidated witnesses are treated by the criminal justice system with the aim of identifying measures to protect those likely to be subject to intimidation and to assist them and other adult vulnerable witnesses give their best evidence in court. This is being taken forward by an interdepartmental working group which includes representatives from the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Crown Prosecution Service. The review will include consideration of the need to issue guidance to the police and others involved in the criminal justice system who may deal with cases of alleged crime against people with learning difficulties.

Work undertaken by the Crown Prosecution Service, headed by the Director of Public Prosecutions and under the superintendence of the Attorney-General, with the police has considered ways to improve information which assists with the early identification of vulnerable witnesses or victims or those who may have special requirements.

A new edition of the Manual of Guidance for the preparation of police files was published in October 1997. It advises officers on the information they should report to prosecutors concerning the special needs of certain witnesses and the additional measures required when they attend court.

Previous guidance relating to mentally vulnerable witnesses issued to Crown Prosecution Service staff in January 1995 draws attention to the fact that victims are often selected by offenders because of their vulnerability. This would be a public interest factor in favour of prosecution. The guidance also warns against assumptions being made about the capabilities of mentally vulnerable witnesses and their ability to give a reliable and complete account of events and urges decisions to be based on the known abilities of individuals.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environmental Audit Committee

Mr. Dafis: To ask the President of the Council (1) when she plans to establish the Commons Environmental Audit Committee; [14266]

(2) when she plans to move the establishment of the Environmental Audit Committee. [12720]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I will be tabling the motion to establish the Environmental Audit Committee very soon.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Exclusion Orders

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many exclusion orders remain in force; what number involve *(a)* republicans and *(b)* loyalists; and if she will make a statement on her policy regarding their use. [13019]

Mr. Ingram: No exclusion orders have been renewed or issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State since May, and none for which she is responsible is currently in force.

Preparatory Schools

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many pupils attend preparatory departments at voluntary grammar schools; if these pupils are entitled to bus passes; what is the cost of these pupils to public funds; what are the estimated staff redundancy costs of the closure of these preparatory schools; what is the estimated additional cost to public funds of the transfer of these pupils to maintained and controlled primary schools; and if she will make a statement about the future of voluntary preparatory schools. [13648]

Mr. Worthington: At October 1996, enrolments in the preparatory departments of voluntary grammar schools were 2,193. Pupils in these preparatory departments are not eligible for transport assistance. In 1996–97 grant aid to the preparatory departments of voluntary grammar schools totalled £1,307,380. The Department of Education is presently seeking the views of relevant schools on the implications of reducing or terminating public funding to them. Until those consultations have been concluded it is not possible to forecast possible redundancy costs or the additional costs, if any, resulting from preparatory department pupils transferring to primary schools.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the suppliers to her Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13539]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* All Departments are required to pay all their bills within agreed contract terms, or 30 days from receipt of the goods or service or a valid invoice, whichever is later, where no such terms exist. Such detailed information on payment performance for the current financial year could

be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the average time taken by her Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13955]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding reply 4 November 1997]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in reply to a similar question from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November 1997, *Official Report*, column 5.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the expenditure by *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if she will make a statement. [13271]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The information requested in respect of the Northern Ireland Office, Northern Ireland Departments, their agencies and NDPBs for the years 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98 is as follows:

	1995–96 £	*1996–97* £	*1997–98* £
Department			
(i) Tax consultants	—	6,514	13,275
(ii) Other	—	—	—
Agencies			
(i) Tax consultants	—	—	—
(ii) Other	—	—	—
NDPBs			
(i) Tax consultants	6,764	4,365	7,016
(ii) Other	11,298	20,128	21,619

Royal Ulster Constabulary

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many RUC barracks are maintained in Northern Ireland; and if she will list those currently being planned, built, replaced, renovated, reinforced, upgraded or extended or to be closed. [13057]

Mr. Ingram: The RUC estate currently consists of 164 establishments. There is an on-going programme of maintenance, including work to comply with health and safety requirements.

Future requirements are currently being assessed against policing needs and availability of funding.

Border Crossings

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the blocked border crossings in Northern Ireland in September 1994 and September 1997, indicating anticipated changes in the next six months providing there is no major change in the overall security context. [13060]

Mr. Ingram: At the beginning of September 1994, 104 border crossing points were subject to closure orders which were all rescinded later that month and in October 1994 by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. A list has been attached.

By September 1997 all were re-opened apart from three. Work is under way at BCP 171 Aghalane Bridge, Co. Fermanah, and is due to be completed by November 1998. There are currently no plans to re-open BCP 92 Annaghroe Bridge, Co. Tyrone or BCP 93 Knockaginny Bridge, Co. Tyrone.

Border Crossing points subject to closure orders in early September 1994

BCP 6 Newtown Road, Co. Armagh;

BCP 71 The Plough Crossing, off Crossbane Road, near Middletown, Co. Armagh;

BCP 75 Wilson's Crossing, off Rowan Road, near Middletown, Co. Armagh;

BCP 83 Skerrie's Crossing, Rathtrillick Road, near Middletown, Co. Armagh;

BCP 90 Annagola Bridge, off the Monaghan Road, Co. Armagh;

BCP 91 Cortynan Road, Co. Armagh;

BCP 92 Annaghroe Bridge, Annaghroe Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 93 Knockaginny Bridge, Knockaginny Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 94 Burns' Bridge, off the Derrycourtney Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 96 Ravellea Bridge, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 98 County Bridge, off the Favour Royal Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 101 Off the Favour Royal Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 102 Favour Royal Forest, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 105 Off the Altadaven Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 106 Off the Altadaven Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 107 Cullamore, off the Altadaven Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 108 Old Monaghan Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 109 Mullynavale Road in the townland of Mullynavale, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 110 Mullaghfad Road in the townland of Mullaghfad, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 111 In the townland of Corragunt, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 113 Corragunt Bridge in the townland of Corragunt, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 114 Derryvolan Road, Derryvolan, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 115 Tattymore, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 116 Tattymore, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 117 Rellan, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 120 Clogh Road in the townland of Cloghmore, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 122 Off the Clogh Road in the townland of Cloghmore, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 123 North west of Rathkeevan Lough in the townland of Rathkeevan, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 124 Mullinahinch Road, Mullinahinch, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 125 Off the Lisroon Road in the townland of Annachullion Glebe, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 127 Benson's Bridge in the townland of Shannock Green, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 128 Priest's Bridge in the townland of Shannock Green, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 129 Lacky Bridge in the townland of Lacky, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 136 Dummy's Lough, off Magheraveely Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 137 Clonatty Bridge, Clonfad Road, Clonfad, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 140 Munnilly Bridge, Clonfad Road, Clonfad, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 153 Derrygoas Road, Derrygoas, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 160 Clonelty Road in the townland of Clonelty, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 161 Leitrim Bridge in the townland of Leitrim, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 167 Drumboghan Road, Drumboghanagh Glebe, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 171 Aghalane Bridge in the townland of Aghalane, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 176 Caldragh Road in the townland of Caldragh, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 177 In the townland of Greaghafine, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 178 Springtown Road in the townland of Gortoral, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 179 Gortoral Bridge in the townland of Gortoral, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 180 Swanlinbar River in the townland of Gortoral, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 181 Stumpy Road in the townland of Stumpy's Hill, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 190 Aghavanny Road in the townland of Drumcully, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 191 Cashel Road in the townland of Frevagh, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 192 Off the Latone Road in the townland of Frevagh, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 193 Kilcoo Road in the townland of Carran West, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 197 Rossinver Road in the townland of Carran West, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 198 Abhornahela Bridge on the Drumnasreane Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 199 Manger Beg on the Manger Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 200 Laughill off the White Island Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 205 Cliff Road to the north of Belleek, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 207 Off the Boa Island Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 211 Meenatully Road in the townland of Meenatully, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 212 Tullyvogy Road in the townland of Tullyvogy, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 213 Letter Bridge on the Letter Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 215 In the townland of Tullyhommon, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 216 In the townland of Tullyhommon to the north of Pettigo, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 218 Lurganboy Bridge in the townland of Lurganboy, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 223 Termon Bridge on the Formil Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 224 Movarren Road in the townland of Gortnaree, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 227 Clogher Bridge on the Scraghy Road, Co. Fermanagh;

BCP 228 The Black Gap, Tievanameenta Upper, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 229 Shanaghy Road, Tievanameenta Upper, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 230 Conthem, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 231 Kelly's Bridge, Leaghany, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 232 Sruhangarve Bridge on the Corgary Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 233 Croagh Bridge off the Corgary Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 234 Meenreagh Bridge off the Corgary Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 235 Laghtfoggy Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 236 Laghtmorris Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 238 Carn Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 240 Moneygal Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 241 Off the Moneygal Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 243 Causey Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 246 Lurganboy Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 247 Listymore Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 249 Orchard Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 250 Off the Lisdoo Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 253 Off the Lisdoo Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 258 Clady Bridge, Urney Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 259 Off the Urney Road, Co. Tyrone;

BCP 261 Dismantled railway, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 263 Ballougry Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 265 Off the Mullenan Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 267 Liberty Bridge, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 268 Millbrook Bridge, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 270 Glen Bridge, Bligh's Lane, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 274 Groarty Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 276 Coshquin Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 278 Elagh Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 279 Off the Upper Galliagh Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 280 Upper Galliagh Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 282 Fanny Wyllie's Bridge, Lenamore Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 283 Alder Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 285 Racecourse Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 287 Off the Racecourse Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 289 Coney Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 290 Heyburn's Crossing, Coney Road, Co. Londonderry;

BCP 291 Cannings Lane, Coney Road, Co. Londonderry.

North Belfast (26 September Disturbances)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she has received a report on disturbances in North Belfast involving members of the Paratroop Regiment on 26 September; and if she will make a statement. [13063]

Mr. Ingram: It has been reported that there have been allegations made about the behaviour of military personnel on the Oldpark Road in the early hours of Sunday 27 September. The allegations have not been the subject of a formal complaint. However, a full inquiry has been carried out which ascertained that there were no military vehicles in the area at the time alleged.

Security

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will consider introducing a greater level of transparency into the assessment of the security situation. [13061]

Mr. Ingram: Both the Chief Constable and Ministers regularly provide up-to-date assessments of the security situation which are as comprehensive as possible. Most recently members of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland visited Northern Ireland and were provided with a detailed up-to-date briefing on the current security situation. However, my hon. Friend will be aware that the

nature of some information available to the Government and the security forces is of such a sensitive nature that it cannot be placed in the public domain.

Holding Centres

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many individuals have been detained in each of the holding centres in each of the last six months, by *(a)* gender and *(b)* perceived religious/community origin. [13065]

Mr. Ingram: Set out below are details on the number of persons detained in each of the three holding centres in each month from April to September, categorised by gender. The religious/community origin of persons detained is not recorded.

Persons Detained in Holding Centres

April to September 1997

	Castlereagh		*Gough*		*Strand Road*		*Total*	
	Male	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
April	43	4	9	—	3	—	55	4
May	21	1	9	—	—	—	30	1
June	42	3	5	1	5	1	52	5
July	23	1	3	—	2	1	28	2
August	23	1	20	—	2	—	45	1
September	18	3	11	1	1	—	30	4
Total	170	13	57	2	13	2	240	17

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what target date has been set for the conclusion of the consultation exercise on the recommendations made in the fourth annual report of the Independent Commissioner for the Holding Centres. [13066]

Mr. Ingram: Following consultation with the relevant interested parties, the Secretary of State wrote to the Independent Commissioner for the Holding Centres on 26 September 1997 in response to a number of the recommendations made in his fourth annual report. Some matters remain outstanding and when these have been resolved the Secretary of State will write again setting out the Government's full response. A copy of that letter, when it is issued, will be placed in the Library of the House.

Vehicle Checkpoints

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the location of permanent vehicle checkpoints in Northern Ireland in September 1994 and September 1997, indicating anticipated changes in the next six months providing there is no major change in the overall security context. [13059]

Mr. Ingram: The locations of permanent vehicle checkpoints in Northern Ireland in September 1994 and September 1997 are as follows:

As at September 1994	*As at September 1997*
Middletown	Removed
Cloghoge (Newry/Dublin Road)	Inactive but structure still present
Aughnacloy	Inactive but structure still present
Bessbrook X3	Reduced structures but still in use
Bessbrook High Street	Removed
Mahon Road, Portadown X2	Still in use
Letterkenny Road, Londonderry	Inactive but structure still present
Buncrana Road, Londonderry	Removed
Muff, Culmore Road, Londonderry	Inactive but structure still present
The Hump, Strabane	Inactive but structure still present
Clady	Removed
Rosscor Bridge	Inactive but structure still present
Wattle Bridge	Inactive but structure still present
Mullan Bridge	Inactive but structure still present
Gortmullan	Inactive but structure still present
Annaghmartin	Inactive but structure still present
Killyvilly	Inactive but structure still present
Clonatty Bridge	Inactive but structure still present
Kilturk	Removed
Donegall Pass, Belfast	Removed
Belfast International Airport	Inactive for a period, but returned to use following end of ceasefire

Since the ceasefire many of the permanent vehicle checkpoints are no longer used as checkpoints, however the structures are still manned—they fall into the category which reads "Inactive but structure still present".

In addition, the Civilian Search Unit manned vehicle checkpoints in Belfast at five locations—Royal Avenue, High Street, Queen Street, Donegall Place and Victoria Square. These were removed in September 1994.

All security measures, including permanent vehicle checkpoints are continually reviewed; any changes will depend on the assessment of threat at the time.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Bus Companies

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans he has to investigate developments in the bus industry as a result of mergers and take-overs of privatised former national bus companies and municipal bus undertakings; and if he will make a statement. [13705]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Each merger qualifying for consideration under the Fair Trading Act 1973 is considered on its individual merits. The President of the Board of Trade has said that her general policy will be to make merger references to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission primarily on competition grounds.

The Government are currently reviewing the provision and regulation of local bus services as part of the development of an integrated transport policy.

British Nuclear Fuels plc

Mr. McGrady: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what agreements exist between her Department and BNFL relating to medium-term financial targets; when the most recent target was agreed; and if it assumed mixed oxide fuel would be manufactured by BNFL. [12949]

Mr. Battle: Three-year external financing limits are set for BNFL within the context of the annual corporate plan published by the company. BNFL's EFL for 1997–98 was adjusted from £–67,000,000 to £–169,000,000 to reflect an improved trading performance since the EFLs for three years 1997–98 to 1999–2000 were set in the 1996 Budget. The EFLs were set on the assumption that mixed oxide fuel would continue to be manufactured at Sellafield.

Ministerial Financial Interests

Mr. Lansley: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the areas of departmental business from which the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State has excluded himself as a result of previous financial interests. [12585]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: Ministers in this Government will continue to make public statements about their involvement in specific cases where it is valuable for the conduct of a specific case.

I knew on being appointed a Minister that a small shareholding in the companies detailed below were likely to be released from my late father's estate during summer 1997. For that reason I have stood aside from consideration of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's report on P and O/Stena, and papers relating to the European Commission's investigation under the European Community Merger Regulation of the proposed acquisition by Dupont of certain ICI businesses.

Business Links

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what changes there have been since 1 May to her Department's planned funding for Business Links *(a)* in the current year, *(b)* 1998 *(c)* 1999; what were the figures on 1 May; and what are the figures now. [13521]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* There have been no changes to the planned funding for Business Links in the current financial year; £38.1 million is available towards the cost of establishing the Business Link network and £102.8 million towards the cost of Business Link services.

As with all Government programmes, Business Link funding for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is currently being considered as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what are the results of the latest survey of Business Links' levels of activity, including the number of small businesses using Business Links. [13520]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* A detailed report on Business Link management information is issued quarterly and a copy placed in the House of Commons Library. The report for the period from April to June 1997 will be published later this month.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the suppliers to her Department who have not been paid within the target period during the past year. [13525]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* All Departments are required to pay their bills within agreed contract terms, or 30 days from receipt of goods or services or a valid invoice, whichever is the later, where no such terms exist. The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Government will publish a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97 shortly.

Plutonium

Mr. McGrady: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action will be taken to dispose of Britain's stockpile of civil plutonium. [14304]

Mr. Battle: Decisions on the utilisation of United Kingdom's civil plutonium stocks are for the owners of these stocks, including Magnox Electric, British Energy and BNFL's overseas customers, subject to meeting the necessary physical protection and safeguards requirements. There is no quick and easy way to dispose of the United Kingdom's stocks of civil plutonium. One option is to use some of this plutonium to fabricate mixed oxide fuel to burn in civil nuclear reactors to generate electricity.

The United Kingdom attaches great importance to ensuring that rigorous arrangements are in place to protect against the risk of theft, sabotage or diversion of any of

its plutonium stocks. These stocks are kept under the close scrutiny of the EURATOM Safeguards Office and International Atomic Energy Agency.

Bangladesh

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the level of trade between Britain and Bangladesh in the last year for which figures are available. [14253]

Mrs. Roche: In 1996, trade in goods between Britain and Bangladesh was worth £351 million, 9 per cent. higher than a year earlier. The value of UK exports of goods fell by 20 per cent. to £72 million while UK imports rose by 21 per cent. to £280 million. Information on trade in services with Bangladesh is not available.

THORP Nuclear Plant

Mr. McGrady: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what recent reports she has received from British Nuclear Fuels plc concerning how the THORP plant will operate. [14361]

Mr. Battle: My Department maintains regular contact with BNFL on a wide range of issues. Since THORP began operations in March 1994 some 680 tonnes of fuel had been sheared and dissolved to the end of March 1997. I understand that THORP is planned to reprocess 7,000 tonnes of spent fuel in the first 10 years of operation.

Independent Research and Technology Institutions

Dr. Cable: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress has been made since July in respect of the tax exempt status of those independent research and technology institutions which she is currently reviewing; and if she plans to amend the guidelines for exemption. [14399]

Mr. Battle: I am still considering the responses to my Department's recent consultation exercise on draft revised guidelines for applicants and will make an announcement in due course.

Mersey Dock and Harbour Company

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received concerning the industrial dispute at the Mersey Dock and Harbour Company; and if she will make a statement. [13991]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* My Department has received representations about this dispute from trade union organisations, members of the public and the dockers, their representatives and supporters.

The Government's position is that industrial disputes are matters for the parties concerned, with assistance of the independent Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service where both sides agree. It is not for the Government to intervene.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is her latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which she is responsible; if she will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if she will make a statement. [13583]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The estimated cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in the core DTI is £2.7 million.

Expenditure incurred and planned is as follows:

	£
(i) To date	266,000
(ii) 1997–98	1,353,000
(iii) 1998–99	1,090,000
(iv) 1999–2000	259,000

These sums will be found from within existing and planned PES provision. Executive Agencies and other public sector bodies with which DTI is associated are finalising their own cost forecasts.

Trading Standards

Helen Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she intends to review the current law in respect of the use of minors by trading standards officers to make test purchases of items which should not legally be sold to them; and if she will make a statement. [14317]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* Since local authorities, for which trading standards officers work, already have the necessary powers to make test purchases and use minors where appropriate, I have no plans at present to review the current legislation for which I am responsible in this respect. However, I am aware by virtue of my participation in the Ministerial Group on Alcopops that my colleagues at the Home Office are working towards clarifying the law on the use of children in relation to test purchases of alcohol.

Small Business

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the Government-sponsored organisations which provide *(a)* grant information and *(b)* grants to small businesses. [14619]

Mrs. Roche: Details of grants for small firms are contained in the DTI publication "A guide to sources of help for small firms". In addition, there are local sources of financial help. Small businesses seeking grants and

advice about grants should contact their local Business Link. Grants and advice may also be available from Training and Enterprise Councils, Local Enterprise Companies in Scotland, LEDU in Northern Ireland, Local Enterprise Agencies, Local Authorities and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Energy Council

Mr. Healey: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the outcome of the Energy Council meeting on 27 October. [15189]

Mr. Battle: The Council considered an amended proposal for a European Parliament and Council Directive concerning common rules for the internal market in natural gas.

The Council discussed the mechanisms to be included in the Directive for opening up natural gas markets to competition on an incremental basis. It also considered the procedures and criteria for the granting of possible derogations from the Directive in respect of financial problems which might arise in a competitive market from the long-term contractual commitments of gas companies. In addition, it discussed a number of other issues relating to the Directive, including the treatment of emergent regions and upstream pipelines, the unbundling of company accounts, the authorisation of distribution and arrangements for access to downstream gas grids.

The Council noted the substantial progress made to date in the negotiations and confirmed its political willingness to reach a common position on the Gas Directive at the next Energy Council on 8 December 1997.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when she plans to publish the fourth report of the Chief Child Support Officer; and if she will make a statement. [15187]

Ms Harman: I am today publishing the Annual Report of the Chief Child Support Officer for the year 1996–97. This report records the outcome of the monitoring of decision making in the Child Support Agency during 1996–97 by the Chief Child Support Officer, who reports to me on standards of adjudication. The Report indicates that there is still cause for concern, but that progress has been made. Twenty-two per cent. of decisions monitored had resulted in a child support liability that was wrong in cash terms but more than half had been decided in a way that did not meet all the requirements of the legislation. In his foreword, the Chief Child Support Officer comments on

"continuing improvement but with some way to go before standards are acceptable widely".

While we are aware that much still needs to be done, we acknowledge the progress which this Report reflects. All children have the right to the care and support of both their parents wherever they may live. Child support tackles child poverty and can also offer lone mothers the opportunity to provide for themselves and their children by working, rather than relying on benefits. The effective operation of the child support scheme is essential to ensure these rights and provide these opportunities.

I expect to see continuing progress both as the result of continued efforts by Child Support Agency staff and, in due course, as the provisions in the Social Security Bill are implemented. However, we will be looking closely at the operation of the Child Support Agency in the coming months to ensure that it provides an efficient and effective service to all its clients.

Lone Parents

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will make a statement on the four schemes operated in the voluntary sector outlined in the New Deal for Lone Parents—October 1997 report, with special reference to *(a)* the funding which the Department of Social Security will make available to those schemes and *(b)* the ways in which these schemes will interact with the New Deal for Lone Parents scheme. [14681]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Beta 2000, Instant Muscle, the Sandwell Afro Caribbean Development Agency and, jointly, Gingerbread and Training For Life have been contracted to set up and run innovative schemes to help lone parents on Income Support to take up work. Payments are made to contractors on a monthly basis, dependent on satisfactory performance, with additional amounts payable in respect of each lone parent helped into work. Precise payment details are commercial in confidence. The areas in which these contractors are operating do not overlap with areas covered by the first phase of the New Deal for Lone Parents.

In addition to the four schemes being operated by the organisations listed above, the National Council for One Parent Families were contracted to produce a guide for employers which presents the business case for employing lone parents. This guide is being distributed throughout the country initially through the Opportunity 2000 network and can also be obtained by contacting a national helpline.

All of the contracts concerned were set up in the context of testing different approaches to helping lone parents into work over a three year period. Contracts were initially issued for one year and decisions on their renewal will be made in the context of the national implementation of the New Deal for Lone Parents from October next year. Any lessons learned from the evaluation of both the first phase of the New Deal for Lone Parents and the voluntary sector innovative schemes will inform the design of the national programme.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to address the shortfall between the amount paid in housing benefit in respect of mortgage interest payments and the amount charged by building societies at variable interest rates. [14670]

Mr. Keith Bradley: We have no current plans for shadowing actual interest rates charged to individual borrowers on benefit.

Mortgages

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of mortgages are covered by those lenders on whose interest rates the standard interest rate for unemployed homebuyers is calculated. [14556]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is not available in the format requested.

The standard interest rate is based on an average of approxiately 30 of the largest Building Societies. Currently 25 per cent. of mortgages for home purchase, by value, are covered by all Building Societies.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what date the entitlement of disability living allowance for Peter Walsh, N.I. No. WM 00 36 58C was disallowed; when the request for a review was made; at what stage a consultant's report was requested; and when the review will be determined. [14277]

Mr. Denham: One of our key aims is to rebuild integrity in, and public support for, the Social Security system and the way in which public money is spent. We need to focus on those who are properly entitled to benefit.

This is why we have set up the Benefit Integrity Project. The administration of this programme is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Gentleman with further details.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Terry Rooney, dated 5 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question concerning Mr Walsh and his entitlement to Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

The Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) was set up in response to the recent Benefit Review of DLA. Over the next two years, specially trained staff will make enquiries by postal questionnaire or home visit in around 425,000 cases to establish whether DLA is being paid correctly. Mr Walsh was contacted through the enquiry work of the BIP.

Following receipt of a completed BIP questionnaire from Mr Walsh and based on the information he provided, Mr Walsh was disallowed DLA from 14 August 1997. A review of this decision was requested on 24 September 1997. After full consideration by an Adjudication Officer, further information was sought in the form of a Consultant's report on 22 October 1997. A decision will be made on Mr Walsh's entitlement on receipt of this report. The Agency aims to complete 60% of review decisions within 55 working days, and 80% within 75 working days.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

War Pensions

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many personnel in civilian capacities have been awarded war disablement pensions through service in the Gulf war; and to which units they were attached. [13509]

Mr. Denham: One of our key aims is that delivery of service should be simpler and more efficient. Queries on operational matters concerning the War Pensions Agency are for its Chief Executive, Mr. Kevin Caldwell. I have asked him to write to the hon. Gentleman.

Letter from K. C. Caldwell to Mr. Michael Hancock, dated 5 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about how many personnel in civilian capacities have been awarded War Disablement Pension through service in the Gulf War and to which units they were attached.

No awards of War Pension have been made in respect of service by civilians in the Gulf War.

The only provision for civilians in the War Pensions arena is The Personal Injuries (Civilians) Scheme. This Scheme was introduced at the outbreak of World War II under the Personal Injuries (Emergency Provisions) Act 1939 to provide for civilians who were disabled by war injuries sustained as a result of enemy action during World War II. The Scheme does not cover injuries sustained in any other conflicts.

Personnel employed in a civilian capacity who do not satisfy these provisions, and who wish to claim compensation for disablement due to their employment, should approach their employers direct.

I hope you find my reply helpful.

SCOTLAND

Goods and Services (Payments)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list each of the functions relating to payment for goods or services supplied for which his Department is responsible indicating the management systems purchased, all sub-contractors involved in the work, co-operative arrangements with other departments; and the costs of the systems and processes in the last year for which figures are available. [12571]

Mr. Dewar: My Department is responsible for the following functions in relation to payment for goods and services:

confirming the receipt of goods and services (done locally);

checking the supplier's invoice (done locally);

authorising payment (done locally by someone other than the person who ordered the goods and checked the supplier's invoice);

Keying payment instructions into the main accounting system (done locally or centrally depending on specific arrangements). In a number of instances involving large numbers of individual payments, paying authorising information is supplied to the accounting system by separate systems which manage the individual schemes (though these tend to be for grant and similar schemes (e.g., student awards) rather than the supply of goods and services);

issuing payment (done centrally, and may be by BACS or by payable order).

Payment processing is carried out on my Department's accounting system which utilises cfacs, a package designed by Cedardata plc and supplied to my Department under a contract with International Computers Ltd.

No sub-contractors are involved in making payments for goods and services.

Apart from two executive agencies and one of the associated departments, all Scottish Office and associated departments, including their respective executive agencies, share this one accounting and payments system.

It is not possible to isolate the costs of setting up and maintaining those parts of the Department's accounting system which deal with payments (which in any event are for a wider range of activities than purchasing goods and services) from the costs of setting up and maintaining the system as a whole. In 1997–98 the sums paid to suppliers in connection with the operation of the accounting system as a whole will be £230,764. The cost, in 1997–98, of employing those staff whose duties related solely to the making of payments was £239,262. Nor is it possible, except at disproportionate cost, to calculate the cost of the time incurred by staff for whom the making of payments is only one of many duties.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total cost of external consultancies associated with the specification of the proposed PFI contract at the Western General hospital trust, Edinburgh, and from which budgets these costs were met; what was the estimated cost of the proposed contract at the time the decision was taken not to proceed with the contract; and what is the estimated cost of the publicly financed development at the Western general hospital Edinburgh announced on 23 June. [12750]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 27 October 1997]:* The Western General Hospital NHS Trust incurred around £1.6 million in fees for design, financial and legal advice in connection with the proposed PFI project. The costs were met by the trust from its own resources including non-recurring revenue grants from the Scottish Office. Much of the expenditure incurred would be required under both PFI and publicly funded routes.

In June, the estimated capital value of the PFI project was £70 million. The estimated cost of the smaller publicly funded development is £40 million excluding VAT.

Prisoner Transfers

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what role Ministers of the Northern Ireland Office undertook in relation to the application by convicted prisoner Jason Campbell for the transfer from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland; [13422]

(2) when he was first made aware of the approval of the application to transfer convicted prisoner Jason Campbell from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland; [13417]

(3) on what dates *(a)* he and *(b)* the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, were first made aware of the application to transfer convicted prisoner Jason Campbell from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland; and by whom; [13421]

(4) when the Minister of State at the Scottish Office responsible for Home Affairs authorised or consented to the transfer of convicted prisoner Jason Campbell from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland. [13414]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Northern Ireland Ministers received confirmation on 25 September that Jason Campbell had applied for a transfer. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland contacted the Minister of State at The Scottish Office, also on 25 September, with a request that the application be dealt with promptly. The Minister of State passed that request on to the Scottish Prison Service. He was told on 4 October that an offer of transfer had been approved. I was first made aware of the application, and the fact that it had been approved, on 5 October.

Ministers have since reviewed the relevant procedures and will in future be notified at an early stage of any applications for transfer between jurisdictions.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what steps were taken by Scottish Office Ministers to ascertain whether in the case of the application by convicted prisoner Jason Campbell for transfer from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland the criteria for such a transfer were genuinely met; [13418]

(2) on what specific grounds and in relation to which particular criteria he reversed the decision to authorise the transfer of convicted prisoner Jason Campbell from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland. [13415]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Investigations showed that Jason Campbell had provided false information on his application form, and I made it clear in my statement of 10 October that the transfer should not have been approved.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) under what statutory provision or regulation the original approval of a transfer for the convicted prisoner Jason Campbell from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to Maze prison in Northern Ireland was given; and at whose immediate request; [13420]

(2) which Minister or official of the Scottish office first authorised the transfer of the convicted prisoner Jason Campbell from HM prison Shotts, within the Scottish system, to the Maze prison in Northern Ireland; and on what date. [13419]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The original application for transfer under the Criminal Justice Act 1961 was approved by the Scottish Prison Service under the delegated authority of the Secretary of State on 25 September 1997.

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what applications for transfer of convicted prisoners from the Scottish prisons system to the Northern Ireland prisons system are currently under consideration. [13423]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* As of 4 November, applications from 3 prisoners have been submitted to the Scottish Prison Service for transfer to Northern Ireland and these will be considered on their merits.

Political Prisoners

Mr. Ancram: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland in what circumstances a prisoner within the Scottish prison system may be described as political. [13416]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* There are no circumstances in which a prisoner within the Scottish prison system would be described as political.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14387]

Mr. Dewar: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, on 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Prison Service Recruitment

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the Scottish Prison Service recruitment policy. [15188]

Mr. Dewar: The Scottish Prison Service manages its recruitment in accordance with the Civil Service Commissioners Recruitment Code. This ensures that recruitment is carried out on the basis of fair and open competition and selection on merit. The recruitment arrangements in place are subject to internal management checks and were audited by the Civil Service Commissioners in 1996.

Details of the recruitment carried out in 1996–97 including the use of permitted exceptions to the principles of open and fair competition are contained in the Scottish Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts for 1996–97, a copy of which is in the Library.

WALES

Public Transport

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many passenger miles were travelled by people on public transport in Wales in each year since 1992; and if he will make a statement. [14077]

Mr. Hain: The National Travel Survey is the only source of comprehensive information on journeys by public transport. It provides information for Welsh residents rather than for journeys within Wales. The sample is insufficient to give reliable figures for individual years but the average annual mileage travelled by Welsh residents on public transport is estimated at 1.5 billion miles over the three-year period 1991 to 1993 and 1.2 billion miles for 1994 to 1996.

The annual inquiry of Public Service Vehicle operators provides information on local bus and coach journeys within Wales, with an estimated 0.5 billion passenger miles per year since 1992.

Farming

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consideration is currently being given to an application for European funds to offset the effects of Green Pound price fluctuations on agricultural prices and subsidies; and if he will make a statement. [14165]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Paying the aid would have significant implications for UK public expenditure. We are keeping the case of payment under review, but on the evidence currently available have concluded that the case for payment is at present not proven.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many representations he has received in the past six months on the subject of Green Pound fluctuations in respect of the value of subsidies received by Welsh farmers; and if he will make a statement. [14078]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The Department has received written representations from the two farming unions in Wales and seven others on the impact of Green Pound fluctuations on agriculture. Ministers and officials have also received delegations from farming and farm-related organisations on several occasions.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) when he last met representatives of the National Farmers' Union in Wales to discuss current farming issues; and if he will make a statement; [14080]

(2) how many representations he has received on the review of hill livestock compensatory allowance; and if he will make a statement. [14084]

Mr. Win Griffiths: My right hon. Friend and I have received seven representations from industry bodies and Members of Parliament concerning the 1997 Autumn Review of economic conditions in the hills and uplands. My right hon. Friend and I also recently met, separately, representatives of the National Farmers' Union of Wales and the Farmers' Union of Wales as part of the Review in Wales to discuss the level of rates for the 1998 Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance scheme year. We are now considering, with Ministers from all the Agriculture Departments, the representations we have received before making final decisions on rate levels for 1998.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14389]

Mr. Ron Davies: A full list of statutory instruments laid before the House, whether under the affirmative or the negative procedure during the summer adjournment, is contained int he House of Commons "Votes and Proceedings" dated Monday 27 October 1997, which has been publicly available since Tuesday 28 October 1997.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Student Loans

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to extend access to student loans for part-time students in higher education; and if he will make a statement. [13170]

Dr. Howells: The Government agrees with the Dearing Committee's conclusion that in the light of other requirements for additional funding in higher education, and the fact that many part-time students have access to other resources, extending loans to part-time students should not be a priority. The Committee looked at other ways of securing equity for part-time students, and we are considering its recommendations. In this context, we have already announced that we shall be making funds available for the remission of fees for part-time students who have lost their jobs. We have also indicated that part-time students will benefit from support from increased access funds.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to extend eligibility for supplementary hardship loans to part-time students in higher education from 1998–99; and what estimate he has made of the cost. [14433]

Dr. Howells: The Government has no plans to extend eligibility for supplementary loans, but in line with the Dearing Committee's recommendations is considering other ways of supporting part-time students who experience financial hardship. We have already announced that we shall be making funds available for the remission of fees for part-time students who have lost their jobs. We have also indicated that part-time students will benefit from support from increased access funds.

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what age considerations will be taken into account in decisions on eligibility for student loans in higher education from 1998–99. [14432]

Dr. Howells: In the 1998–99 academic year, students who are aged 50 or over when their courses begin will not be eligible for student loans, but will be entitled to fee support and maintenance grants on the same basis as other students. We are reviewing the eligibility criteria, including those relating to age, which will apply to student loans in 1999–2000 and beyond.

Employment Zones

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made on introducing prototype employment zones; and if he will make a statement. [14422]

Mr. Alan Howarth: On 15 September we published a prospectus and invited eight areas to bid to become prototype Employment Zones. All eight areas submitted outline bids on 6 October which were very encouraging. Final bids are due on 17 November and we expect to announce the successful partnerships in early December with the prototype Employment Zones starting in February 1998.

New Deal

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice his Department has given to the Employment Service on the minimum weekly wage that should be payable to 18 to 25-year-olds offered employment under the New Deal. [14428]

Mr. Andrew Smith: This Department's policy is set out in the Design of the New Deal for 18–24-year-olds which states that:

> "Employers [will] not make a direct cash profit from the subsidy, but that the New Deal employee [will cost] them in wages at least as much as they receive in subsidy. It is expected that the New Deal employees will receive the normal rate paid to comparable employees of the company".

A copy of the Design of the New Deal for 18–24-year-olds has been placed in the Library.

Office for Standards in Education

Mr. Stevenson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the total costs of the Office for Standards in Education since being established and *(b)* the annual costs. [14363]

Mr. Byers: The total cost of Ofsted from April 1993 to March 1997 was £313 million. The costs from September 1992 to March 1993 were within the budget of the Department of Education and were not separately identified.

Annual costs are as follows:

	£ million
1993–94	46
1994–95	63
1995–96	82
1996–97	122
1997–98 (forecast)	151

Students (Fees)

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to exempt unemployed students on part-time higher education courses from tuition fees from 1998–99; and what estimate he has made of the cost. [14431]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State plans to make funds available from 1998–99 to the Higher Education Funding Council for England to enable universities and colleges in England to remit fees for part-time students in higher education who have lost their jobs. Some £2 million will be available for this purpose in 1998–99. Further information will be issued in due course.

Adult Education

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement about his plans for adult vocational postgraduate education in the United Kingdom in colleges of education. [13108]

Dr. Howells: The Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, published on 23 July, recommended that more sub-degree provision should take place in FE colleges and that there should be no growth in degree level qualifications offered by FE colleges. The consultation on the report's recommendations ended in early October and we are still considering the responses. We will respond to this and other Dearing Report recommendations in due course.

Recruitment (Non-EU Residents)

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements exist in respect of visas, work permits and length of allowable stay to encourage the recruitment of non-European Union residents with special qualifications and expertise in areas where *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* EU states have shortfalls. [13112]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The work permit arrangements are designed to allow UK employers to fill posts requiring high level qualifications, senior level responsibilities, or rare technical skills for which no suitably qualified resident labour is available.

These arrangements are continuously reviewed to take account of changes in the UK labour market. Other EU Member States generally have their own, broadly similar, systems.

Work permits are approved for periods up to a maximum of four years. The period of approval depends on the skills and experience required and the length of time the need is expected to continue.

Visas are the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will produce copies of the report "Excellence for Children—Meeting Special Educational Needs" in a video format for British Sign Language users. [14594]

Ms Estelle Morris: It is impractical to produce the SEN Green Paper in video format. I hope that, in consulting on the Green Paper, organisations representing hearing-impaired people will take into account the views of those who are unable to access the printed document.

Foreign Students

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students who did not hold a British passport enrolled at United Kingdom universities from *(a)* other EU countries and *(b)* south-east Asia for each of the last five years; and what are the projected enrolment figures for (i) the current academic year and (ii) the next two academic years. [14695]

Dr. Howells: I will write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

Teachers (Redundancy)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers others than those in further or higher education or independent schools *(a)* were made redundant and *(b)* did not have their contracts renewed for each month from September 1996 to September 1997. [14694]

Mr. Byers: I will write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

University Applications

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of university applications for 1997–98 and the levels of parental income of applicants compared to previous years; and if he will make a statement. [14559]

Dr. Howells: I will write to the hon. Friend as soon as possible.

Retired Teachers

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 29 October, *Official Report*, column *819*, what proportion of teachers, other than those in further or higher education or independent schools, who retired under the age of 60 years in the period October 1996 to September 1997 retired *(a)* on the grounds of (i) ill-health, (ii) efficiency or (iii) redundancy and *(b)* aged (1) under 30, (2) 30 to 34, (3) 35 to 39, (4) 40 to 44, (5) 45 to 49, (6) 50 to 54 and (7) 55 to 59 years. [14702]

Mr. Byers: I will write to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible.

Higher Education

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the annual cost of returning to the full grant system for higher education. [14562]

Dr. Howells: I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible.

Trade Union Membership

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the work force are members of trades unions in each member state of the European Union. [14504]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have been asked to reply.

The following table contains the information sought:

Member state	*Union density, 1995*
Austria	41
Belgium	54
Denmark	80
Finland	79
France	9
Germany	29
Greece	24
Ireland	55
Italy	44
Netherlands	26
Luxembourg	n/a
Portugal	26
Spain	19
Sweden	91
United Kingdom	33

Sources:

ILO World Labour Report, 1997–98, OECD Employment Outlook July 1997.

Notes:

All figures for 1995, the most recent consistently available, bar Belgium (1994) and Ireland (1990). Figures for Luxembourg are unavailable. Union density is union members as a proportion of wage and salary earners. Figures are compiled in a variety of different ways across member states and are not strictly comparable in all cases.

DEFENCE

Executive Agencies

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) when the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency became operational; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13656]

(2) when the Queen Victoria School became operational as a defence agency; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13336]

(3) when the Service Children's Education became operational as a defence agency; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13376]

(4) when the Defence Postal and Courier Service became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13340]

(5) what evaluation of the Defence Secondary Care Agency there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13652]

(6) when the RAF Signals Engineering Establishment became operational as a defence agency; what targets it has been set; what evaluations of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13332]

(7) when the Defence Transport and Movements Executive became operational; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13658]

(8) what targets have been set for the Defence Vetting Agency; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13338]

(9) what evaluation of the Medical Supplies Agency there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13650]

(10) when the Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13653]

(11) what evaluation he has made of the Defence Analytical Services Agency; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13163]

(12) when the RAF Personnel Management Agency became operational; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13333]

(13) when the *(a)* Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency, *(b)* Army Individual Training Organisation, *(c)* Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency, *(d)* Army Base Repair Organisation, *(e)* Army Personnel Centre and *(f)* Army Technical Support Authority became operational; what targets have been set for each; what evaluation of each body's work has taken place; when he expects further reviews to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13167]

(14) when the Navel Bases and Supplies Agency became operational; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13659]

(15) when the Defence Intelligence and Security Centre became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13339]

(16) what evaluation of the Disposal Sales Agency there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13651]

(17) what evaluation of the Defence Bills Agency his Department has made; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13164]

(18) when the Defence Clothing and Textile Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13378]

(19) what evaluation of the Ships Support Agency there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13330]

(20) when the Defence Animal Centre became operational; what evaluation of its work his Department has made; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13165]

(21) when the RAF Training Group Defence Agency became operational; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13331]

(22) when the Military Survey Defence Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13654]

(23) when the Logistic Information Systems Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement. [13655]

(24) when the RAF Logistics Support Services became operational as a defence agency; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13335]

(25) when the RAF Maintenance Group Defence Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation of it to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13334]

(26) when the *(a)* Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre, *(b)* Duke of York Royal Military School and *(c)* Hydrographic Office of the Royal Navy became operational as defence agencies; what evaluation he has made of their work; when he expects further reviews to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13168]

(27) what evaluation of the Defence Dental Agency there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13375]

(28) when the Defence Estates Organisation became operational; what targets have been set for it; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13657]

(29) pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Newcastle under Lyme (Mrs. Golding) of 10 July, *Official Report*, columns *527–28*, what evaluation of the Defence Medical Training Organisation there has been; and when he expects further evaluation to take place; [13661]

(30) when the Pay and Personnel Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13337]

(31) when the Naval Recruiting and Training Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement. [13515]

(32) when the Naval Manning Agency became operational; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement; [13649]

(33) what targets have been set for the Defence Codification Agency; what evaluation of it there has been; when he expects further evaluation to take place; and if he will make a statement. [13377]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested is given in the table; although the hon. Gentleman's questions related to only 40 agencies and trading funds, the information is provided in respect of all 43 of the Department's Agencies and Trading funds, for the sake of clarity and completeness.

Agency	*Date of launch*	*Date of evaluation*[1] *(a) Last (b) Next due*	*Key targets*[2] *published in Official Report (a) Date (b) Column*
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency	1 April 1997	(b) 2002	(a) 20 February 1997 (b) 720
Army Base Repair Organisation	1 April 1993	(a) Ongoing	(a) 10 February 1997 (b) 7
Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency	4 April 1995	(b) 2000	—[3]
Army Training and Recruiting Agency	1 July 1997[4]	(b) 2002	(a) 1 July 1997 (b) 71
Army Personnel Centre	2 December 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 18 March 1997 (b) 505
Army Technical Support Agency	16 October 1995	(b) 2000	(a) 18 March 1997 (b) 506
Defence Animal Centre	1 July 1993	(a) Ongoing	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 463
Defence Analytical Services Agency	1 July 1992	(a) Ongoing	(a) 1 July 1997 (b) 72/73
Defence Bills Agency	1 January 1996	(b) 1999	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 440
Defence Codification Agency	17 June 1996	(b) 1999	—[3]
Defence Clothing and Textiles Agency	22 November 1994	(b) 1999	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 464
Defence Dental Agency	1 March 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 10 July 1997 (b) 529
Defence Estate Organisation	17 March 1997	(b) 2002	(a) 18 March 1997 (b) 514
Defence Evaluation and Research Agency	4 April 1995[5]	(b) 2000	—[3]
Defence Intelligence and Security Centre	1 October 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 462
Defence Vetting Agency	1 April 1997	(b) 2002	(a) 20 March 1997 (b) 857
Defence Postal and Courier Service Agency	1 July 1992	(a) Ongoing	(a) 3 July 1997 (b) 257–258

Agency	Date of launch	Date of evaluation[1] (a) Last (b) Next due	Key targets[2] published in Official Report (a) Date (b) Column
Defence Secondary Care Agency	30 April 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 10 July 1997 (b) 529
Defence Transport and Movements Executive	4 April 1995	(b) 2000	(a) 10 July 1997 (b) 356
Disposal Sales Agency	3 October 1994	(b) 1999	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 353
Duke of York's Royal Military School	1 April 1992	(a) Ongoing	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 353
Hydrographic Office	1 April 1996[5]	(b) 2001	—[3]
Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre	19 April 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 464
Logistic Information Systems Agency	21 November 1994	(b) 1999	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 257
Logistic Support Services	9 December 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 9 December 1997 (b) 17–18
Medical Supplies Agency	29 February 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 10 July 1997 (b) 528
Defence Medical Training Organisation	1 April 1997	(b) 2001	(a) 10 July 1997 (b) 527
Meteorological Office	1 April 1996[5]	(b) 2001	(a) 19 June 1997 (b) 256
Military Survey	2 April 1991	(a) Ongoing	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 463
Ministry of Defence Police	1 April 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 27 October 1997 (b) 662
Naval Aircraft Repair Organisation	1 April 1992	(a) 1996 (b) 1999	(a) 22 July 1997 (b) 528–529
Naval Bases and Supply Agency	11 December 1996	(b) 2002	(a) 28 October 1997 (b) 792–793
Naval Manning Agency	1 July 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 354
Naval Recruiting and Training Agency	1 April 1995	(b) 2000	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 355
Pay and Personnel Agency	1 February 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 23 June 1997 (b) 354
Queen Victoria School	1 April 1992	(a) Ongoing	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 465
RAF Maintenance Group	2 April 1991	(a) 1996 (b) 2001	(a) 31 July 1997 (b) 465
RAF Personnel Management Agency	1 February 1997	(b) 2002	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 351
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment	22 November 1994	(b) 1999	—[3]
RAF Training Group	1 April 1994	(b) 1999	(a) 20 March 1997 (b) 859
Service Children's Education	1 April 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 354
Ships Support Agency	11 December 1996	(b) 2001	(a) 30 July 1997 (b) 354
Specialist Procurement Services	1 June 1997	(b) 2002	(a) 3 June 1997 (b) 122

[1] Evaluation is taken to mean the periodic review of the Agency, which involves a performance evaluation, the re-visiting of the Prior Options process, and the re-issue of the Framework Document. Initial Policy was this should take place at not more than 3 year intervals, but this was later extended to 5 years, with some specified exceptions. As the process takes a period of some months, only the year in which the review is expected to take place is given. Where the first review is described as "ongoing" the second review would normally be expected to take place 5 years after the re-issue of the Framework Document.

[2] The Date and column at which the Key Targets for FY1997–98 were published in the *Official Report*. For the sake of clarity and completeness this information has been included for all the Department's Agencies, although the hon. Member's questions did not ask this in all cases.

[3] The 1997–98 Key Targets for these five Agencies have not yet been published in the *Official Report*.

[4] Formerly Army Individual Training Organisation.

[5] Date of Launch as a Trading Fund; all were previously Agencies.

Development Sites

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the value of the development sites proposed for disposal by the Ministry of Defence, including the housing units; and when he expects the sales to be made. [13911]

Mr. Spellar: Based on the number of sites which are in disposal or are currently planned to become surplus, we estimate that disposal receipts for land and buildings will total some £140 million in 1997–98, £125 million in 1998–99 and £70 million in 1999–2000.

Housing units for disposals within the Annington Homes portfolio are released to that company within the provisions of the contract of sale.

CS Gas

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the report produced by the chemical and biological defence establishment, Porton Down, on the study of the medical effects of the CS gas solvent methyl isobutyl ketone conducted in 1996 at the request of the Police Scientific Development Branch. [14305]

Mr. Spellar: In 1996 the Chemical and Biological Defence (CBD) Sector of DERA at Porton Down was contracted by the Police Scientific Development Branch of the Home Office to conduct a study of the medical effects of the CS gas solvent methyl isobutyl ketone. This report is the property of the Home Office as the contracting authority.

However CBD in consultation with the Police Scientific Development Branch will make arrangements to place a copy of this 1996 report in the Library of each House.

Contingency Operational and Procurement Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what support his Department and DESO are providing for UK companies to attend COPEX Jordan 1998, COPEX USA May 1998 and COPEX USA (San Diego) October 1998. [14365]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence does not subsidise or play any part in the organisation of these exhibitions. The MOD Defence Export Services Organisation, DESO, does, on occasion, inform UK companies about such exhibitions and may advise UK exhibitors.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what MOD land will be made available for the 1998 Contingency Operational and Procurement Exhibition. [14367]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has not been approached by the organisers of the 1998 Contingency and Operational Procurement Exhibition.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14378]

Dr. Reid: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster yesterday, 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Porton Down

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the nature of the work which is being carried out jointly between the chemical and biological defence establishment, Porton Down, and Cortecs International; what is the purpose of this work; when did this work begin; when is this work expected to end; and what assessment he has made of the value of the work. [14307]

Mr. Spellar: The aim of the work being carried out jointly between the Chemical and Biological Defence (CBD) sector of DERA at Porton Down and Cortecs International is to investigate new technologies which will facilitate the future development of oral vaccines. The collaboration began in June 1996 with the preliminary phase completed in October 1997.

The benefit is mutual. It allows CBD to exploit Cortecs expertise in creating oral drugs, and has given Cortecs access to CBD research on vaccines. The joint project will contribute to the development of vaccines to meet both Ministry of Defence and public health requirements.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13265]

Dr. Reid *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* Spending on tax consultants and other external tax advice was as follows:

(£ pounds)

	Ministry of Defence (excluding agencies)	*Defence agencies*	*NDPBs*
1995–96	—	27,450	1,175
1996–97	5,500	35,790	1,175
1997–98 (to date)	—	8,130	90
The following expenditure is anticipated			
1997–98	4,500	—	1,085

These figures exclude tax advice obtained by defence contractors and as part of wider consultancies, which could not be extracted without disproportionate cost.

"Defence Agencies" includes all spending by the Ships Support Agency which became an Agency on 11 December 1996.

Mine Information and Training Centre

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the Mine Information and Training Centre will be set up; how many staff it will have; and what its budget will be. [14479]

Dr. Reid: The Mine Information and Training Centre will become fully operational on 1 January 1998. Its establishment will become fully operational on 1 January 1998. Its establishment will be one captain, one warrant officer and one senior non-commissioned officer and it will have an annual budget of £125,000.

Harrier Accident (Wittering)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence it he will make a statement on the accident occurring on 31 October involving a Harrier jet at RAF Wittering, indicating the level of hazard caused by the plane's cargo. [14601]

Mr. Spellar: The only stores being carried by the aircraft at the time of the accident was a training missile, the seeker head of which had a coating containing a tiny amount of mercury thallium. As the component was destroyed on impact, the mercury thallium would have completely dissipated within about 10 seconds and, as a result, would have posed no hazard. This has subsequently been confirmed during the environmental health monitoring tests routinely carried out at aircraft crash sites.

RAF Signals Engineering Establishment

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment for 1997–98. [15141]

Dr. Reid: The Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment Agency's Key Targets for the financial year 1997–98 are:

Operational strategy

KT 1: Reduce the core as far as possible and continue to refine it against the charging military need.

KT 2: Maintain 100 per cent. of core skills to support likely operations.

Performance strategy

KT 3: Deliver 100 per cent. of operational tasks to time.

KT 4: Develop Customer Supplier Agreements with principal customers and Lodger Units by 31 March 1998.

KT 5: Deliver 85 per cent. of non-operational tasks to time.

KT 6: Reduce the number of quality failures in delivered systems by 5 per cent. on the previous year.

KT 7: Maintain ISO 9000 quality standards.

KT 8: Reduce the Cost per Task Manhour, at Full Cost, by 5 per cent. on the previous year.

Personnel strategy

KT 9: Achieve Investors in People Accreditation by 1 December 1998.

Financial strategy

KT 10: Integrate the Agency's Accounts into Headquarters Logistics Command's Resource Accounting and Budget (RAB) financial system by 1 April 1998.

Information Technology strategy

KT 11: Complete commissioning of the Future Business System (FBS) initiative by 1 April 1998.

Defence Codification Agency

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what key targets have been set for the Defence Codification Agency for 1997–98. [15142]

Dr. Reid: The Defence Codification Agency's (DCA) Key Targets for the financial year 1997–98 are:

KT 1: Complete an annual policy review by 30 September of each year.

KT 2: Examine 50,000 items per year to identify duplicate NATO stock numbers and report the duplicates to the relevant Design Authority.

KT 3: Extend DCA's file purification service to the Army by 30 April 1998.

KT 4: Extend DCA's file purification service to the RAF by 30 April 1998.

KT 5: Reduce the unit cost of codification to less than £56 by 31 March 1998 (£51 by 31 March 1999, £48 by 31 March 2000, £46 by 31 March 2001 and £44 by 31 March 2002).

KT 6: Reduce the Agency's Running Costs by 5.8 per cent. by 31 March 1998 (10 per cent. by 31 March 1999, 2 per cent. by 31 March 2000, 2 per cent. by 31 March 2001 and a further 2 per cent. by March 2002).

KT 7: Reduce the number of post codification queries to 13,000 in 1997–98, 12,000 in 1998–99, 11,000 in 1999–2000, 10,000 in 2000–01 and 9,000 in 2001–02.

KT 8: To develop and encourage DCA personnel to realise their full potential through the 100 per cent. application of Investors in People (IIP) standards and practices.

KT 9: TO provide effective leadership and to promote morale.

Surveillance Towers

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the locations of British Army surveillance towers in Northern Ireland in September 1994 and September 1997; how may of these are on civilian property; what plans exist to withdraw some of these from use in the next six months; and if he will estimate the total annual cost of staffing and maintaining such installations in the past 12 months. [13058]

Dr. Reid: In September 1994 there were surveillance towers at 10 hilltop sites in the South Armagh areas, two towers in Londonderry and three surveillance posts mounted on blocks of flats within Belfast. In September 1997 there were the same number of sites in South Armagh and Belfast, but only one in Londonderry, the other having been closed in 1995. In addition to surveillance towers, the security forces maintain a number of other structures which are used for a variety of observation purposes.

All the sites are on land either leased or requisitioned from civilians, civilian organisations or other Government agencies.

The security situation is kept under constant review and the configuration of the military infrastructure adjusted accordingly. However, there are no plans to withdraw any of the towers from use over the next six months.

The annual costs of staffing and maintaining these installations are not held centrally and could only be produced at disproportionate cost.

Civilian Complaints

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many civilian complaints were made against each regiment of the British Army during the past three years; and how many of these led to disciplinary action. [13062]

Dr. Reid: Figures for complaints against the Army outside Northern Ireland are not recorded centrally. So far as the Army in Northern Ireland is concerned complaints are categorised as criminal or non-criminal. During the past three years the Royal Ulster Constabulary received the following number of criminal complaints:

Criminal complaints

Year	*Total*
1995	28
1996	32
1997	[1]65

[1] Figures up to 31 October 1997.

A breakdown by regiment is not available. As regards non-criminal complaints the Independent Assessor of Military Complaints Procedures in Northern Ireland recommended in 1994 that these should be informally resolved at local level wherever possible. In the past three

years the numbers of non-criminal complaints dealt with in this way were as follows:

Informal non-criminal complaints

Year	*Total*
1995	41
1996	264
1997	[1]483

[1] Figures up to 30 September 1997.

Once again a breakdown by regiment is not available. Where informal resolution is not possible or appropriate, complaints are investigated more formally. The numbers of formal non-criminal complaints, by regiment, in the past three years are set out in the table.

Formal non-criminal complaints

	1995	*1996*	[1]*1997*
The 1st Battalion The Staffordshire Regiment	2	—	—
The 1st Battalion Green Howards	1	—	—
42 Commando Royal Marines	1	1	—
The 1st Battalion The Parachute Regiment	3	—	4
The 1st Battalion The King's Regiment	1	—	—
The Royal Military Police	2	—	—
The 3rd Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	3	8	12
The 4th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	—	—	2
The 5th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	—	—	—
The 7th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	3	—	1
The 8th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	2	3	7
The 9th Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	1	—	2
Unit unknown	2	2	3
The 1st Battalion The Royal Irish Regiment	—	1	—
The 1st Battalion The Royal Scots Regiment	—	1	—
The 1st Battalion the Grenadier Guards	—	1	2
The 1st Battalion The Coldstream Guards	—	2	—
The Duke of Wellington's Regiment	—	1	—
The 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment	—	2	1
The Scots Guards	—	1	—
The 1st Battalion The Royal Welch Fusiliers	—	—	3
The 3rd Battalion The Royal Air Force Regiment	—	—	1
The 3rd Battalion The Royal Horse Artillery	—	—	1
The 9th/12th Battalion The Royal Lancers	—	—	1
The 1st Battalion The Cheshire Regiment	—	—	2
The 1st Battalion The Royal Artillery	—	1	2
The 1st Battalion The Highlanders	—	—	1
The 1st Battalion The Welsh Guards	—	—	2
655 Army Air Corps	—	—	1
Lisburn Station Guard Force	—	—	1
42 Battery 22 Air Defence Regiment	—	—	1
Withdrawn Military not involved	—	—	1
The 1st Battalion The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders	—	—	—
The 1st Battalion The Light Infantry	—	—	—
The 1st Battalion The Kings Own Scottish Borderers	—	—	—
24 Engineer Regiment	—	—	—
The King's Royal Hussars	—	—	—
Total	21	24	51
Disciplinary action taken	2	1	4

[1] To 30 September 1997.

Military Forces, Northern Ireland

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the numbers of part-time members of the RIR banded by salary levels in increments of £5,000 per annum and indicate the average number of hours per week in each band. [13081]

Dr. Reid: The information requested is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many British Army and RIR barracks are maintained in Northern Ireland; and if he will list those currently being planned, built, replaced, renovated, re-inforced, up-graded or extended or to be closed. [13079]

Dr. Reid: The number of British Army bases in Northern Ireland having approximately 100 soldiers or more is 63.

The Army estate is kept under constant review to ensure it provides best value for money and meets operational requirements. There are no plans to build additional barracks in Northern Ireland. The future of a number of bases is under consideration, but no final decisions have yet been made.

A continual programme of maintenance and development exists to keep the Army estate in good operational order. At present major works projects costing £300,000 or more have been initiated or are underway at the following barracks:

Alexander Barracks

Abercorn Barracks

Shackleton Barracks

Kinnegar Barracks

Palace Barracks

Thiepval Barracks

Massereene Barracks

Lisanelly Barracks

Girdwood Barracks.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what were the total staffing levels of the Royal Irish Regiment in September *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997, (i) in total and (ii) broken down (1) into numbers of full-time and part-time (2) by gender (3) by perceived religious/community origin and (4) battalion, and indicating those where service is limited to Northern Ireland. [13080]

Dr. Reid: The Royal Irish Regiment has one General Service battalion earmarked for world-wide duties, including taking turn on operations in Northern Ireland. The overall strength of the General Service Battalion as at 1 September was as follows: 572 in 1995, 576 in 1996 and 469 in 1997. There are no infantry cap-badged service women in these numbers. A breakdown by gender of other

cap badges is not readily available nor is detail on the perceived religious/community origin of serving members of the General Service Battalion.

In addition to the General Service Battalion, there are six Home Service Battalions comprising full time (FT) and part time (PT) soldiers, who serve only in Northern Ireland, except for some training.

The total strength of the Home Service Battalions as at 30 September was 5,190 in 1995, 4,855 in 1996 and 4,757 in 1997. The information requested on (1) the breakdown into full-time and part-time, (2) gender, (3) perceived religious/community origin and (4) battalion is not readily available for the month of September; however the figures for 31 December 1995 and 1996 are set out in the table. Figures relating to 1997 will not be available until early next year.

	1995				1996			
	HS(FT)		HS(PT)		HS(FT)		HS(PT)	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
3 R Irish								
Prot	513	56	409	72	497	62	395	65
RC	30	3	10	—	24	1	10	1
Other	14	1	9	—	12	1	11	—
4 R Irish								
Prot	510	49	408	53	467	47	392	51
RC	13	1	3	—	10	1	3	—
Other	2	—	3	—	2	—	—	—
5 R Irish								
Prot	320	32	171	20	294	27	176	17
RC	17	2	3	1	23	2	6	1
Other	9	3	7	2	11	3	9	1
7 R Irish								
Prot	392	20	317	34	374	14	325	29
RC	12	3	5	1	15	2	7	2
Other	10	1	14	—	3	—	1	0
8 R Irish								
Prot[1]	332	46	295	49	326	39	282	46
RC	9	1	4	1	7	1	2	1
Other	4	—	1	—	13	2	10	0
9 R Irish								
Prot	362	26	211	21	339	26	185	24
RC	31	2	15	1	32	3	30	1
Other	12	3	9	1	10	3	6	1
Depot R Irish								
Prot	208	9	—	1	194	16	—	—
RC	29	—	—	—	25	1	—	—
Other	12	—	—	—	10	1	—	—
Total	5,250	5,030						

Key:
HS(FT)—Home Service (Full Time).
HS(PT)—Home Service (Part Time).
PROT—Protestant.
RC—Roman Catholic.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the overall strength in September *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997 of British military forces in Northern Ireland broken down into numbers attached to the RAF, Royal Navy, RIR, RIR part-time and others. [13078]

Dr. Reid: The information requested is set out in the table:

	1995	1996	1997
Army	10,612	10,395	[1]11,016
Royal Air Force	1,118	1,124	1,140
Royal Navy	289	296	321
The Royal Irish Regiment Home Service Full Time	3,036	2,847	2,754
The Royal Irish Regiment Home Service Part Time	2,154	2,008	2,003
Total	17,209	16,670	17,234

Figures as at 30 September.
[1] Includes the Province Reserve Battalion and the Rural Reinforcement Battalion which are fully committed to Northern Ireland although only one company of each is currently deployed in the Province.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the British Army regiments currently deployed in Northern Ireland, indicating the numbers attached to each and the estimated duration of their tour of duty; and if he will make a statement on planned deployment during the next 12 months. [13083]

Dr. Reid: The British Army Infantry Battalions currently committed to Northern Ireland are listed in the table, along with their strength and planned tour length:

	Strength	*Length of tour*
The 1st Battalion The Cheshire Regiment	604	2 years—until August 1998
The 1st Battalion The Grenadier Guards	527	2 years—until March 1998
The 2nd Battalion The Light Infantry	617	2 years—until August 1999
The 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers	598	2 years—until April 1999
The 1st Battalion The Queen's Lancashire Regiment	587	2 years—until August 1999
The 1st Battalion The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (Princess Louise's)'	609	2 years—until March 1999
The 1st Battalion The King's Own Scottish Borderers	580	6 months—until March 1998
The 1st Battalion The Royal Highland Fusiliers (Princess Margaret's Own Glasgow and Ayrshire Regiment)	568	6 months—until November 1997
The 1st Battalion The Queen's Royal Hussars (The Queen's Own and Royal Irish)	417	6 months—until April 1998
The 1st Battalion The Parachute Regiment	517	6 months—until December 1997
The 1st Battalion The Royal Scots (The Royal Regiment)'	462	6 months—until December 1997
The 3rd Battalion The Parachute Regiment	440	6 months—until January 1998

Figures as at 30 September.
' The 1st Battalion The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the 1st Battalion The Royal Scots, respectively the Province Reserve Battalion and the Rural Reinforcement Battalion, are fully committed to Northern Ireland, although currently only one company of each is deployed in the Province.

In addition there are six Home Service battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment, totalling 4,757 soldiers, comprising both full-time and part-time members, which are wholly committed to service in Northern Ireland.

The security situation is kept under constant review and the level of Army support to the Royal Ulster Constabulary adjusted accordingly in line with their requirements. However, it is the Department's policy not to disclose details of future deployments to the Province.

Hunting

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list those areas designated as sites of special scientific interest where his Department has issued a licence to hunt; and if he will make a statement. [14443]

Mr. Spellar: Those areas designated as sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) where a licence to hunt has been issued are as follows:

Name of Hunt	*Name of SSSI*
Surrey Union	Thursley and Hankley Commons Woolmer Forest, Bordon Ash to Brookwood Heaths
Avon Vale Hunt	Salisbury Plain
Royal Artillery Hunt	Salisbury Plain
South and West Wiltshire Hunt	Salisbury Plain
East Kent Hunt	Folkestone to Etchinghill Escarpment Great Shuttlesfield Down Alkham, Lydden and Swingfield Woods
Essex and Suffolk Hunt	Roman River
Border Hunt	Ramsay's Burn Wood Grasslees Wood Durtrees Burn Harbottle Moors Barrow Meadow Linbriggs Barrowburn Meadows Cottonshopehead Quarry River Coquet Simonside Hills
West Percy Hunt	Barrowburn Meadows Linbriggs Harbottle Moors Barrow Meadows River Coquet
Bewcastle Hunt	Irthing Gorge Caudbeck Flow Spadeadam Mires River Eden
Bedale Hunt	Lower Swaledale Woodland
West of Yore Hunt	Stainton Moor
Wensleydale Hunt	Bellerby Moor
Lunesdale Hunt	Appleby Fell
Ullswater Hunt	Appleby Fell
Brecon and Talybont Hunt	Blaencilieni
Irfon and Tywi Hunt	Blaencilieni
Glyn and Celyn Hunt	Blaencilieni
Sennybridge District Hunt	Blaencilieni

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which hunts currently have a licence to hunt on his Department's land; to which areas of land licences apply; and if he will make a statement. [14441]

Mr. Spellar: The Foxhunts which currently have a Licence to operate on Ministry of Defence land are set out below.

	Area
Surrey Union Hunt	Elstead and Hankley Training Areas
Avon Vale Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
Royal Artillery Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
South and West Wiltshire Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
East Kent Hunt	Cinque Ports Training Area
Blankney Hunt	Beckingham Training Area
Zetland Hunt	Feldom Training Area
Bedale Hunt	Dry Training Area, Catterick
West of Yore Hunt	Dry Training Area, Catterick
Wensleydale Hunt	Bellerby Ranges, Catterick
Lunesdale Foxhounds	Warcop Training Area
Ullswater Foxhounds	Warcop Training Area
Brecon and Talybont Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
Irfon and Tywi Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
Glyn and Celyn Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
Sennybridge District Hunt	Sennybridge Training Area
South Pembrokeshire Hunt	Templeton Airfield
Tanatside Hunt	Nesscliffe Training Area
North Shropshire Hunt	Nesscliffe Training Area
West Percy Hunt	Otterburn Training Area
Border Hunt	Otterburn Training Area
Bewcastle Hunt	RAF Spadeadam
Tynedale Hunt	Albermarle Barracks

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the licences granted to hunt on his Department's land in the hunting seasons *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97 broken down into local authority area; and if he will make a statement. [14445]

Mr. Spellar: Those Licences granted to hunts broken down by Local Authority Area for 1995–96 and 1996–97 are as follows:

a. 1995–96

Name of Hunt	*Local authority*
Surrey Union	Waverley District
	Guildford Borough
	Surrey Heath
Taunton Vale Foxhounds	South Somerset District
Avon Vale Hunt	West Wiltshire District
Royal Artillery Hunt	West Wiltshire District
South and West Wiltshire Hunt	West Wiltshire District
East Kent Hunt	Shepway District Council
	Dover District Council
Essex and Suffolk Hunt	Colchester Borough Council
Zetland Hunt	Richmond District Council
Bedale Hunt	Richmond District Council
West of Yore Hunt	Richmond District Council
Wensleydale Hunt	Richmond District Council
Lunesdale Hunt	Eden District Council
Ullswater Hunt	Eden District Council
Brecon and Talybont Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Irfon and Tywi Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Glyn and Celyn Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Sennybridge District Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Tanatside Hunt	Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
North Shropshire Hunt	Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
West Percy Hunt	Alnwick District Council
	Northumberland National Park
The Border Hunt	Alnwick District Council
	Tynedale District Council
	Northumberland National Park
Bewcastle Hunt	City of Carlisle District Council
Tynedale Hunt	Castle Morpeth Borough Council

b. 1996–97

Name of Hunt	*Local authority*
Surrey Union	Waverley District
	Guildford Borough
	Surrey Heath
Avon Vale Hunt	West Wiltshire District
Royal Artillery Hunt	West Wiltshire District
South and West Wiltshire Hunt	West Wiltshire District
East Kent Hunt	Shepway District Council
	Dover District Council
Blankney Hunt	North Kesteven District Council
Zetland Hunt	Richmond District Council
Bedale Hunt	Richmond District Council
West of Yore Hunt	Richmond District Council
Wensleydale Hunt	Richmond District Council
Lunesdale Hunt	Eden District Council
Ullswater Hunt	Eden District Council
Brecon and Talybont Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Irfon and Tywi Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Glyn and Celyn Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
Sennybridge District Hunt	Carmarthen County Council
	Powys County Council
South Pembrokeshire Hunt	Pembroke County Council
Tanatside Hunt	Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
North Shropshire Hunt	Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
West Percy Hunt	Alnwick District Council
	Northumberland National Park
The Border Hunt	Alnwick District Council
	Tynedale District Council
	Northumberland National Park
Bewcastle Hunt	City of Carlisle District Council
Tynedale Hunt	Castle Morpeth Borough Council

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the terms and conditions of hunt licences include a requirement that hunts follow the rules as set out by the Masters of Foxhounds Association; and if he will make a statement. [14447]

Mr. Spellar: Each Licence includes a Schedule of Hunting Rules for the hunt to abide by, one of which is that the

"Masters of Foxhounds are to conduct their hunting in accordance with the Rules issued by the Masters of Foxhounds Association".

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many licences to hunt on his Department's land have been revoked in each of the last three years, indicating *(a)* the hunts involved and *(b)* the reasons for licence withdrawal; and if he will make a statement. [14439]

Mr. Spellar: No Licence for hunting over MOD land have been revoked in the last 3 years.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on whose authority licences are issued to hunt on his Department's land; how the terms and conditions are drawn up; and if he will make a statement. [14444]

Mr. Spellar: Licences are issued on the authority of the Secretary of State for Defence. The terms and conditions are agreed between the hunt and the local Defence Land Agent.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in what circumstances the terms and conditions of hunt licences permit hunts to *(a)* block up badger setts, *(b)* dig out and flush foxes and *(c)* construct or maintain artificial earths on his Department's land; and if he will make a statement. [14446]

Mr. Spellar: Hunting licences do not generally contain clauses prohibiting the stopping up of badger setts, although all contain clauses stating that hunts must not cause damage to land or the woods, banks, fences and crops thereon. It is my Department's policy not to allow the practices of digging out and flushing foxes on its estate. The construction or maintenance of artificial earths on the Defence Estate is not permitted.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which hunts were issued licences to hunt on his Department's land for the *(a)* 1995–96 and *(b)* 1996–97 hunting seasons; and if he will make a statement. [14440]

Mr. Spellar: The licences granted to hunts were:

(a). 1995–96

Surrey Union
Taunton Vale Foxhounds
Avon Val Hunt
Royal Artillery Hunt.
South and West Wiltshire Hunt
East Kent Hunt
Essex and Suffolk Hunt
Zetland Hunt
Bedale Hunt
West of Yore Hunt
Wensleydale Hunt
Lunesdale Hunt
Ullswater Hunt
Brecon and Talybont Hunt
Irfon and Tywi Hunt
Glyn and Celyn Hunt
Sennybridge District Hunt
Tanatside Hunt
North Shropshire Hunt
West Percy Hunt
The Border Hunt
Bewcastle Hunt
Tynedale Hunt

b. 1996–97

Surrey Union
Avon Vale Hunt
Royal Artillery Hunt
South and West Wiltshire Hunt
East Kent Hunt
Blankney Hunt
Zetland Hunt
Bedale Hunt
West of Yore Hunt
Wensleydale Hunt
Lunesdale Hunt
Ullswater Hunt
Brecon and Talybont Hunt
Irfon and Tywi Hunt
Glyn and Celyn Hunt
Sennybridge District Hunt
South Pembrokeshire Hunt
Tanatside Hunt
North Shropshire Hunt
West Percy Hunt
The Border Hunt
Bewcastle Hunt
Tynedale Hunt

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Genetically Modified Potatoes

11. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the deep-frying characteristics of genetically modified potatoes. [12620]

Mr. Morley: We are not funding any research on the deep-frying characteristics of genetically modified potatoes.

Agenda 2000

12. **Mr. Yeo:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the impact on the income of United Kingdom farmers of the adoption of Agenda 2000 proposals. [12621]

Dr. John Cunningham: It is likely that the immediate result of the Commission Agenda 2000 proposals for reform of the arable, beef and dairy sectors would be a reduction in total income from farming in the UK in the order of 2 per cent. of 1996 levels. Because proposals relating to modulation are unclear, this estimate assumes changes are applied on an unmodulated basis.

15. **Mr. Todd:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the European Commission Agenda 2000 document on agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [12624]

Dr. John Cunningham: The Agenda 2000 proposals are a welcome step towards positive reform of the CAP. However there are areas, for example milk, where the proposals do not go far enough. We will be looking to make progress on discussion of these during the UK Presidency of the Agriculture Council.

Meat Hygiene

14. **Mr. Cranston:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to start publishing the hygiene scores of abattoirs and meat handling facilities. [12623]

Mr. Rooker: Hygiene Assessment (HAS) scores have been published in banded form in the Ministry's monthly Meat Hygiene Enforcement Report since May 1997. Publication of HAS scores for individual named licensed abattoirs and cutting plants will commence in January 1998.

Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances

16. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to publish the rates of hill livestock compensatory allowances for the coming year. [12625]

Mr. Morley: The rates will be announced as usual later this month.

Dioxin

17. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about dioxin levels in the area around the Coalite works in Bolsover. [12626]

Mr. Morley: The Department sampled milk from 19 farms in the Bolsover area in July this year. The results of this survey were published recently and show that the levels of dioxins in all samples of milk, except from one farm, are similar to those found in other parts of the UK. The one farm runs a suckler herd and does not produce milk for human consumption.

Spongiform Encephalopathies

18. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects all transmissible spongiform encephalopathies to be eliminated from all farm animals. [12627]

Mr. Rooker: Research by Professor Anderson of Oxford, which was published in "Nature" last year, indicates that the BSE epidemic will reach insignificant levels by the year 2001.

We are supporting research into sheep scrapie to learn more about this disease which we hope will enable the industry to develop future control strategies based on genetic resistance.

Cattle Breeding

19. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what initiatives he will introduce to encourage the farming of British Belgian Blue cattle and other pedigree beef breeds; and if he will make a statement. [12628]

Mr. Rooker: There are no plans to introduce initiatives to encourage the farming of British Belgian Blue cattle or other pedigree beef breeds.

Common Agricultural Policy

20. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the United Kingdom's *(a)* gross and *(b)* net contribution to the common agricultural policy for the year 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [12629]

Mr. Rooker: The United Kingdom contributes to the EU budget as a whole, and not to any particular part. The draft budget for 1998 is set at 84.7 becu (£55.9 billion), of which the CAP accounts for 41.0 becu (£27.1 billion). The 1999 budget will not be prepared until next spring. Actual expenditure will depend on various factors, including the weather, trade flows and decisions to be taken by the Council of Ministers, and cannot be predicted.

22. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has made for reforming the common agricultural policy to provide greater value to consumers. [12631]

Mr. Rooker: The Government favour a more market-oriented Common Agricultural Policy through the phasing out of production related support. The European Commission agrees with our view, and has proposed reform of the cereals, beef and dairy regimes in that direction as part of its Agenda 2000 package. If the Commission's estimated reductions in market prices feed through fully to retail, total savings to consumers in the UK would be around £1 billion—equivalent to 2 per cent. of the retail food prices index.

English Wine Industry

21. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to promote the English wine industry. [12630]

Mr. Morley: I am aware of the advances which the English and Welsh wine industry have made in recent years. My colleagues and I will lose no appropriate opportunity to promote the industry's products.

Rural Needs

23. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals the Government have to address the special needs of people who live and work in rural areas. [12632]

Mr. Morley: The Government recognise the special needs of people who live and work in rural areas. We are committed to taking an integrated approach to tackling rural problems and want to encourage a vibrant rural economy in partnership with all those interested in countryside issues. The cross-departmental Comprehensive Spending Review of Countryside and Rural Policy which is currently underway will provide a basis on which to consider these issues.

Fish Conservation

24. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, when he next intends to meet the National Federation of Fisherman's Organisations to discuss conservation. [12633]

Mr. Morley: I am always ready to meet the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations to discuss conservation.

Farm Animal Welfare

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to improve the welfare of farm animals. [12615]

25. **Mr. Alan Johnson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he has put in place recently to improve the welfare of farm animals. [12634]

Mr. Morley: New EU rules on transport were implemented only five weeks after the General Election. We are consulting about new regulations on the welfare of calves and we are reviewing pre-export procedures for animals intended for further fattening or slaughter. The agreement we secured at Amsterdam for a new EU Treaty protocol on animal welfare has given a firm basis from which we can seek real improvements to EU welfare standards both during our forthcoming Presidency and beyond. This is only the beginning: a number of further initiatives are planned.

Beef

26. **Mrs. Butler:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the stringency of the controls on British beef relative to those applying in the rest of the European Union. [12635]

Mr. Rooker: Controls on British beef are amongst the most stringent in the world.

The Commission carried out inspection missions to Member States in November and December 1996. Their report on Risk Factors and Surveillance procedures in the Community highlighted shortcomings in controls in some Member States. As a result the Commission have decided to take action against 10 Member States in respect of their apparent failure to enforce some aspects of Community legislation on BSE.

In May the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) considered the Commission's draft report and concluded that action should be taken to extend controls on specified bovine material (SBM) to imports from the EU, and to imports from third countries, other than those where there is no known risk to BSE, unless resolved on an EU wide basis. A Commission Decision laying down controls for the removal and disposal of Specified Risk Material from cattle was adopted by the Commission on 30 July and will apply throughout the Community from 1 January 1998. In the meantime, only four other Member States have their own controls on specified material in cattle: the Republic of Ireland, France, the Netherlands and Portugal.

BSE

28. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his estimate of the full cost of the BSE crisis to *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* other European Union countries. [12637]

Mr. Rooker: Our estimate of the financial cost of the BSE crisis to the Exchequer over the four years 1996–97 to 1999–2000 is approximately £3.7 billion. The Department has commissioned an independent study to provide a comprehensive assessment of the economic impact of BSE across the whole UK economy and within particular regions. We do not have details of the financial cost to other EU countries.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the incidence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy in cattle has been in the United Kingdom in each of the past 10 years, expressed as a percentage of each identifiable breed. [14180]

Mr. Rooker: The number of cattle confirmed as having BSE in the United Kingdom in each year of the last 10 complete years and the most recent figures for 1997 are listed by cattle breed in the table:

Breed	*1986*	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	1	5	17	38	51	24	16	7	6
Aberdeen Angus ×	0	0	3	7	19	46	127	164	140	63	41	13
Aberdeen Angus × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	2	3	0	0	0
Aberdeen Angus × Charolais	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	1
Aberdeen Angus × Friesian	0	0	4	14	28	76	172	184	89	52	25	6
Aberdeen Angus × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Aberdeen Angus × Jersey	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	1	0	0	0
Aberdeen Angus × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	6	2	7	1	0
Aberdeen Angus × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Aberdeen Angus × Sussex	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Ankole	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Ayr × Charolais	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire	0	8	31	93	195	274	381	314	209	96	64	15
Ayrshire ×	0	1	3	8	1	7	1	5	3	1	1	0
Ayrshire × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Blonde D'Aquitaine	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Galloway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Gelbvieh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	5	2	1	1	0
Ayrshire × Red Friesian	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	0	0	1
Ayrshire × Simmental	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	0	0
Ayrshire × Sussex	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Ayrshire × Welsh Black	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Bazadaise	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	4	6	17	27	19	6	5	1
Belgian Blue ×	0	0	0	0	1	3	22	22	25	17	10	1
Belgian Blue × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0
Belgian Blue × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	0
Belgian Blue × Holstein	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	0	2	0	0	0
Belgian Blue × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Belted Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Black Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Black Hereford ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	7	1	0
Black Limousin ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine	0	0	0	1	5	2	11	9	15	8	10	3
Blonde D'Aquitaine ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	4	11	4	1
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Charolais	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Friesian	0	0	0	0	1	6	17	17	10	5	3	3
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	0
Blonde D'Aquitaine × Lincoln Red	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Blue Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4	1	1	1	0
Blue Grey ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0

Breed	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	'1997
Blue Roan	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
British Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
British White	0	0	0	0	8	27	4	2	1	1	0	1
British White × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
British White × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	2	1	0
British White × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Brown Swiss	0	0	2	1	2	5	4	6	4	0	9	6
Brown Swiss ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	4	2	3
Brown Swiss × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	8	6	9	11
Brown Swiss × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Brown Swiss × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Brown Swiss × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Brown Swiss × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Canadian Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Canadian Angus × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Canadian Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Charolais	0	0	2	11	17	41	103	116	66	54	18	6
Charolais ×	0	0	0	6	7	31	69	102	72	51	24	11
Charolais × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Charolais × Friesian	0	0	0	0	4	27	54	47	33	16	11	5
Charolais × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	3	0	0	0
Charolais × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	0	1
Charolais × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
Charolais × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	4	1	0	0	0
Charolais × Murray Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0
Charolais × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	2	0	1
Charolais × South Devon	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Chianin × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Chianina ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Chianina × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Devon	0	0	0	0	5	3	4	10	5	3	2	0
Devon ×	0	0	0	0	1	5	11	4	3	2	0	0
Devon × Blonde D'Aquitaine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Devon × Friesian	0	1	0	1	6	3	16	19	14	9	3	0
Devon × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0
Dutch Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Friesian	3	86	2,089	6,008	11,615	21,065	29,572	26,676	18,632	10,958	6,072	2,049
Friesian ×	0	0	0	0	11	40	98	96	48	25	15	5
Friesian × Ayrshire	0	0	0	2	6	15	22	22	16	6	2	2
Friesian × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	1	11	41	39	27	19	11	1
Friesian × Blue Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Friesian × Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	1	5	4	1	0	0	0
Friesian × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	1	5	6	5	5	3	0	0
Friesian × Holstein	0	16	127	204	388	637	999	1,231	1,179	816	494	206
Friesian × Longhorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Friesian × Normandy	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Friesian × Red Poll	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Friesian × South Devon	0	0	0	0	3	5	8	7	5	0	0	1
Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	4	1	1	1	0
Galloway ×	0	0	0	2	0	0	5	0	0	1	0	0
Galloway × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0
Galloway × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Galloway × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Galloway × Saler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Galloway × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0
Galloway × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Gelbvieh	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	9	1	0	3	0
Gelbvieh ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	0	0	0	0
Gelbvieh × Charolais	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Gelbvieh × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	1	0	1	0
Gelbvieh × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Gloucester	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gloucester ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Guernsey	0	2	19	64	146	221	332	302	198	123	68	30
Guernsey ×	0	0	3	1	1	1	2	5	5	1	1	0
Guernsey × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Guernsey × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	4	0	1
Guernsey × Merse Rhine Issel	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Guernsey × Murray Gray	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Guernsey × Red Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Guernsey × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
Hereford	0	0	1	24	44	82	138	144	100	60	25	11
Hereford ×	0	0	9	65	141	362	727	830	574	386	195	63
Hereford × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0
Hereford × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	1	1	4	3	2	1	3	0
Hereford × Devon	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Hereford × Friesian	0	4	21	106	242	571	1,150	1,370	755	433	217	63
Hereford × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0

Breed	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Hereford × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Hereford × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	3	1	0	0
Hereford × Red Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	1	0	0	0
Hereford × Shorthorn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	0
Hereford × Simmental	0	0	0	0	2	1	8	10	7	4	4	2
Hereford × South Devon	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Highland	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	4	4	3	2	2
Highland ×	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Highland × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Holstein	0	2	62	147	272	475	475	399	267	164	116	50
Holstein ×	0	0	0	0	8	42	128	103	87	22	13	1
Holstein × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	1	2	4	3	1	0	0	0
Holstein × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Jersey	0	0	19	60	135	210	323	290	230	114	68	27
Jersey ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	4	2	0	1	1
Jersey × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
Jersey × Charolais	0	0	1	0	1	3	2	0	1	2	0	0
Jersey × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Jersey × Friesian	0	1	3	2	4	10	11	4	9	5	2	3
Jersey × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
Jersey × Welsh Black	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Limousin	0	0	1	10	13	46	96	114	88	56	39	10
Limousin ×	0	0	0	0	28	87	217	335	221	159	91	42
Limousin × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Limousin × British White	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limousin × Friesian	0	0	2	12	32	92	246	308	183	123	46	21
Limousin × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	5	0	1	0	0
Limousin × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	5	6	1	2	0
Limousin × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	3	1	0	0	0
Limousin × Jersey	0	0	0	0	2	4	6	3	2	1	1	1
Limousin × Luing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Limousin × North Devon	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Limousin × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	1	1
Lincoln Red	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3	3	1	1	0
Lincoln Red ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0
Longhorn	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	2	2	1	1	1
Luing ×	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Luing × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Marchigiana	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Meuse Rhine Issel	0	0	0	1	1	3	5	2	2	2	1	2
Meuse Rhine Issel ×	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	0
Meuse Rhine Issel × Ayrshire	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Meuse Rhine Issel × Friesian	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0	1	0	3	0
Meuse Rhine Issel × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Meuse Rhine Issel × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Murray Grey	0	0	0	0	1	7	4	8	6	3	1	0
Murrey Grey ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4	4	1	1	0
Murray Grey × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	2	3	0	0	1
Murray Grey × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Murray Grey × South Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Normandy ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Normandy × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
North Devon	0	0	0	0	2	5	2	5	0	0	0	0
North Devon ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
North Devon × Friesian	0	0	0	2	1	5	8	9	1	4	2	0
North Devon × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Not Recorded	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Old English White	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Piedmontese	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	2	0
Piedmontese ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0
Piedmontese × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Red Friesian	0	0	2	8	28	50	72	45	48	20	9	5
Red Friesian × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Red Friesian ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2
Red Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	2	1	0	0	0
Red Holstein × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Red Poll	0	0	0	1	4	2	6	6	11	2	5	1
Red Poll ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Red Poll × Hereford	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Red Poll × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Romagnola	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Romagnola × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Romagnola × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Saler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	0
Saler ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	1
Saler × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Shetland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Shorthorn	0	2	2	20	8	21	44	67	47	23	15	1

Breed	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	[1]1997
Shorthorn ×	0	0	2	2	3	7	14	11	13	5	3	0
Shorthorn × Blue Grey	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Shorthorn × Friesian	0	0	0	0	4	9	12	11	4	3	4	1
Shorthorn × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shorthorn × Jersey	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Shorthorn × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Shorthorn × Merse Rhine Issel	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shorthorn × Red Friesian	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Shorthorn × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	0
Simmental	0	0	2	11	16	52	123	150	111	71	33	13
Simmental ×	0	0	0	0	15	72	213	299	195	144	93	33
Simmental × Angus	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Belgian Blue	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Friesian	0	1	2	8	28	69	239	242	166	106	51	14
Simmental × Galloway	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Simmental × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	0	2	0
Simmental × Highland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Holstein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	2
Simmental × Lincoln Red	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Simmental × Luing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0
South Devon	0	0	2	4	4	14	20	33	19	5	9	1
South Devon × Aberdeen Angus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
South Devon × Guernsey	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0
South Devon × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
South Devon ×	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	6	2	2	0	0
South Down	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sussex	0	0	1	1	5	2	4	16	9	4	6	0
Sussex ×	0	0	0	0	2	5	7	3	8	0	1	1
Sussex × Devon	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sussex × Friesian	0	0	0	1	5	5	7	14	16	12	3	2
Sussex × Limousin	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Sussex × Simmental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Welsh Black	0	0	1	4	1	4	8	19	11	5	1	2
Welsh Black ×	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	2	7	2	0	1
Welsh Black × Friesian	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	1	2	1	0
Welsh Black × Hereford	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Welsh Black × Limousin	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	1	0
White Park	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Unknown	1	194	76	271	599	291	370	296	217	148	121	47
Total	4	318	2,493	7,193	14,160	25,244	36,989	34,828	24,394	14,537	8,131	2,830

[1] 1997 figures for GB to 3 November 1997. 1997 figures for NI to 31 October 1997.

The Department does not hold data on the numbers of resident cattle by breed and cannot therefore calculate the percentages requested.

Food Labelling

29. **Mrs. Fyfe:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure labels on foodstuffs carry accurate information. [12638]

Mr. Rooker: We are determined to improve openness and information to consumers. We have succeeded in getting EC agreement to better labelling of mechanically recovered meat and are pressing our EC partners for all foods to be labelled if they contain genetically modified material. When the review of nutrition labelling rules get underway we shall argue for more, simpler and better presented information.

Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many agreements under the countryside stewardship scheme involve access. [12636]

Mr. Morley: The Countryside Stewardship Scheme Currently has 1,207 agreements which include access elements, amounting to almost 20 per cent. of total agreements.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make representations to other EU states to urge eastern European countries to end the export of live animals to the EU. [13854]

Mr. Rooker: The European Commission and other Member States are already aware of the UK Government's opposition to the long distance transport of live animals intended for further fattening or slaughter, irrespective of the origin of those animals or their destination. We will continue to make known our opposition to such trade whenever the opportunity arises.

Animal Welfare

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the adequacy of time spent by local veterinary inspectors in inspecting animals destined for export to ensure that they are fit to travel as required by the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997; and if he will make a statement. [13931]

Mr. Rooker: Local Veterinary Inspectors, as veterinary surgeons, must use their professional judgment in ensuring that sufficient time is given to assessing the fitness of animals to travel. The State Veterinary

Inspectors audit their procedures to ensure that the proper standards are maintained. In addition, for export health certification purposes, the Department will be producing clearer instruction for Local Veterinary Inspectors on what an inspection should comprise. It is proposed that this will include a benchmark for the length of time an inspection ought to take, according to the different circumstances which may prevail.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14372]

Mr. Morley: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, on 5 November 1997, *Official Report,* column *216.*

Sea Defence (Waveney)

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food which areas of coastline in the Waveney constituency he considers to be most vulnerable to breaches of sea defence. [14295]

Mr. Morley: This Department is responsible for flood and coastal defence policy in England and significantly contributes to the funding of capital defence measures. However, individual flood and coastal defence works are designed, constructed and maintained by the Environment Agency, local councils and Internal Drainage Boards. These bodies identify the need for defence measures locally, including which areas of coastline are most vulnerable to breaching, and decide which projects to promote and their timing.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the expenditure made by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies, on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13253]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The Department has made no payments of the kind described in the relevant years. Only one such payment has been made by the Executive Agencies, this being for £4,000 to a consultant, on behalf of the Meat Hygiene Service, in 1995–96.

Information on such expenditure by non-departmental public bodies is not centrally available, but is currently being sought. I will write to the hon. Member with the collated information as soon as possible.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is the policy of his Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13254]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The general policy of the Department and its Executive Agencies is that no use should be made of external consultants in respect of taxation matters. However, there was one such transaction by the Meat Hygiene Service in the financial year 1995–96, as reported in my reply to the hon. Gentleman's previous Question.

Non-departmental public bodies enjoy greater freedom of action, and are responsible for their own tax affairs. However, the Department's resources are available to all such bodies and officials are sometimes consulted for advice.

Over-30-months Scheme

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much meat and bone meal is in storage as a result of the over-30-months scheme. [14598]

Mr. Rooker: As at 31 October 267,387 tonnes of meat and bone meal were held in store.

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what guidelines he has issued to the directors of BBSRC about his Department's responsibility for core research and staff at BBSRC Institutes. [14502]

Mr. Rooker: The Department funds research in support of its policies and, within this framework, commissions a substantial amount of research at BBSRC institutes. However, responsibility for core-funding of science and for staff at these institutes rests with the Office of Science and Technology and BBSRC management themselves. It is not therefore appropriate for this Department to issue guidelines on these matters to BBSRC Directors.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Admiralty House

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list the *(a)* official entertainment functions and *(b)* conferences which have been held at Admiralty House since May 1997. [12922]

Dr. David Clark: Admiralty House has four state rooms, which are available for use by Ministers and Senior Officials. The following official entertainment functions have taken place there since May 1997:

Date	*Function*	*Department*	*Hosted by or on behalf of*
May			
12	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the General Staff
14	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the Air Staff
15	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Pol)
15	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Permanent Under Secretary
21	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Pol)
22	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the Air Staff
22	Reception	Ministry of Defence	Secretary of State
June			
9	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	1* Sea Lord
11	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Vice Chief of the Defence Staff

Date	Function	Department	Hosted by or on behalf of
16	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the General Staff
18	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief Scientific Adviser
July			
2	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	1* Sea Lord
7	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Vice Chief of the Defence Staff
8	Lunch	Cabinet Office, Office of Public Service	Permanent Under Secretary
14	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Vice Chief of the Defence Staff
16	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Secretary of State
17	Lunch	Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Minister of State (Europe)
17	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Secretary of State
21	Lunch	Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Minister of State
21	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Permanent Under Secretary
22	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Vice Chief of the Defence Staff
August			
4	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the General Staff
5	Lunch	Department for International Development	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
15	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Permanent Under Secretary
26	Lunch	Department for International Development	Secretary of State
September			
3	Lunch	Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Minister of State
3	Dinner	Department of Trade and Industry	Minister for Trade
4	Lunch	Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
8	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Chief Scientific Adviser
9	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Pol)
11	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Pol)
16	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Vice Chief of the Defence Staff
18	Lunch	Foreign and Commonwealth Office	Minister of State (Europe)
22	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the Defence Staff
23	Dinner	Department of Trade and Industry	President of the Board of Trade
24	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Secretary of State
30	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Assistant Chief of the Defence Staff (Pol)
30	Dinner	Lord Chancellor's Department	Lord Chancellor
October			
6	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Chief of the Defence Staff
6	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
7	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Secretary of State
7	Dinner	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
16	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	1* Sea Lord
22	Reception	Department of Trade and Industry	President of the Board of Trade
23	Dinner	Ministry of Defence	1* Sea Lord
28	Lunch	Ministry of Defence	Secretary of State

No conferences have been held at Admiralty House during this period.

Civil Service Pensions

Mr. MacGregor: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what would be the cost of indexing pensions paid to civil servants on early retirement under the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme from the ages of 50 to 55 years. [14424]

Dr. David Clark: Civil Service pensions, along with those paid to other public service pensioners, are increased in accordance with the provisions of the Pensions Increase Acts. Any change for the Civil Service scheme would have repercussions for other public service schemes; in very broad terms and additional cost of indexing all public service pensions from the ages of 50 to 55 years is likely to be at least £50 million a year. The cost for the Civil Service scheme alone would be some £2½ million. The government have no plans to change the current arrangements.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

National Audit Office (Staff)

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission if he will make a statement on the number of staff employed by the NAO. [11705]

Mr. Sheldon: The current strength of the National Audit Office is 751 staff. In addition the Office has at present another 98 staff on secondment with other organisations or on maternity leave or career break.

CABINET OFFICE

Millennium Dome

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what is the expected entrance cost to the Millennium Dome at Greenwich; what number of United Kingdom citizens are expected to visit the Millennium Dome during the year 2000; and if he will make a statement. [13275]

Mr. Mandelson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is developing a comprehensive pricing structure which will aim to maximise visitor income whilst ensuring that the Experience is accessible to all who wish to visit. The NMEC aims to achieve 12 million visits to the Experience from the UK and overseas.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what measures are in place to ensure that there will be no cost overrun for the public sector or from lottery funds relating to the project to construct the Millennium Dome; and if he will make a statement. [13276]

Mr. Mandelson: The New Millennium Experience Company has robust management and financial controls in place which are in line with the terms set by the Millennium Commission for the award of its grant, and in line with conditions set by me as the Shareholder. When the Prime Minister announced the go-ahead for the project on 19 June, it was on the proviso that there would be no extra burden on the public purse over and above the grant-in-aid allocated to English Partnerships for acquisition and preparation of the peninsula site.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio what is the planned life expectancy of the Millennium Dome at Greenwich; and if he will make a statement. [13277]

Mr. Mandelson: The Government are currently considering a range of possible, self-financing, uses for the Millennium Experience Dome over the longer term. Its life expectancy will depend on future use and upkeep, with no significant structural refit expected for at least the first 25 years.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) what private sector moneys have so far been secured for the Millennium Dome at Greenwich; what proportion of planned private sector moneys this represents; and if he will make a statement; [13274]

(2) how many private sector sponsorship deals have so far been signed in relation to constructing and running the planned Millennium Dome at Greenwich; and if he will make a statement. [13279]

Mr. Mandelson: There is a significant level of interest from potential sponsors and this is expected to be translated into firm commitments in the coming months.

HEALTH

Erb's Palsy

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the incidence by health authority for each of the last five years of Erb's palsy; and what research into this condition his Department is currently undertaking. [13855]

Mr. Boateng: Information on the number of completed in-patient treatments of those patients admitted to National Health Service hospitals in England with a primary diagnosis of Erb's palsy for the five years up to 1994–95 has been placed in the Library. The main agency through which the Government support medical and clinical research is the Medical Research Council. The MRC does not currently fund any research into Erb's palsy. It has not received any applications for funds to carry out such work. However, a working group under the auspices of the Confidential Enquiry into Stillbirths and Deaths in Infancy (CESDI) is currently preparing guidance on the management of shoulder dystocia (misplacement of the baby's shoulder in the birth canal) which is considered to be a contributory factor in many cases of Erb's palsy.

Deregulation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14384]

Ms Jowell: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster gave him on 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Private Finance Initiative

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent changes have taken place in the private finance initiative aimed at reducing the financing costs of capital developments. [14106]

Mr. Milburn: Since August the National Health Service Executive has been undertaking a review of the process and product of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) in the NHS. One of their tasks is to make specific recommendations on how the cost of the procurement process under the PFI can be reduced. The results of the review will be announced in early 1998.

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate his Department has made about the future incidence of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. [14092]

Ms Jowell: On 15 September 1997 the Chief Medical Officer announced the formation of a sub-group of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) with the following remit

"To assess the information about the epidemiology of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and develop as far as possible advice on trends in the disease".

The sub-group will have as an early task an assessment of what information will be needed to make soundly based estimates of the future incidence of the disease. However, on present indications it will be three to four years before they are in a position to do this.

In the meantime it remains too early to make confident estimates of the likely number of cases.

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has recently evaluated on the links between Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and new variant CJD. [14094]

Ms Jowell: Two research papers were published in *Nature* on 2 October 1997—"Transmissions to mice indicate that new variant CJD is caused by the BSE agent" by M. E. Bruce and colleagues based at the Neuropathogenesis Unit in Edinburgh and "The same prion strain causes nvCJD and BSE" by A. F. Hill and colleagues based at Imperial College School of Medicine at St. Mary's, London.

The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) considered these findings and concluded that they provide convincing evidence that the agent which causes Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy is the same as that which causes new variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (nvCJD). The Committee also stated that the most likely explanation of the cases of nvCJD to date remains exposure to BSE before the introduction of the Specified Bovine Offals (SBO) ban in 1989.

SEAC also concluded that the necessary measures to protect public health and animal health are in place and saw no need for any changes in the light of these new findings.

Incontinence

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evaluation *(a)* has been carried out and *(b)* is planned by his Department of the total cost of health care provided by the NHS for incontinence. [14029]

Mr. Boateng: No evaluation of these costs has been carried out and none is planned.

Specific information on the cost of health care provided by the National Health Service for people with incontinence is not collected centrally and we have no plans to change this. The Department is seeking to reduce the burden of data collection by the NHS and rationalise data flows within the NHS and between the NHS and the centre. The collection of additional information on incontinence would not be in line with this policy.

Community Care

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to issue formal guidance to local authorities so as to ensure that BD8 referrals automatically trigger a full community care assessment by local authorities. [14028]

Mr. Boateng: The proposal that BD8s should automatically trigger a full community care assessment by local authorities is made in a recent report by the Royal National Institute for the Blind, *A Question of Risk: Community care for older visually impaired people in England and Wales.* The department will study the report carefully.

Health Trusts (Assets)

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assets currently in the hands of health trusts are being considered for transfer to the private sector; and if he will make a statement. [14075]

Mr. Milburn: The value of surplus or redundant assets owned by National Health Service trusts can form part of the negotiations between the trust and the private sector in a Private Finance Initiative deal, but any such assets must be sold or disposed of at open market value.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to what time scale the review of assets is being conducted; how much the review is expected to cost; and if he will make a statement. [14105]

Mr. Milburn: The next periodic revaluation of National Health Service land and buildings to take place in summer 1999 to allow NHS trusts, health authorities and other NHS bodies to establish accurate fixed asset values as of 31 March 2000. The exercise is expected to cost in the region of £2.25 million.

NHS Patients

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many patients he estimates will require NHS treatment in each of the next five years; [14458]

(2) how many patients he estimates will receive NHS treatment in each of the next five years. [14459]

Mr. Milburn: The health service will treat more patients over the next five years. The Government's election manifesto stated that the Government will raise spending on the National Health Service in real terms every year, and put money towards patient care. The manifesto also made clear our commitment to the historic principle of the NHS:

"if you are ill or injured there will be a NHS there to help . . . access will be based on need . . . not on your ability to pay . . . or on who your GP happens to be or on where you live".

We intend to keep to these promises.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients he estimates will be on NHS waiting lists on 30 April 2002. [14460]

Mr. Milburn: Despite the dreadful situation we inherited from our predecessors we are committed to having shorter waiting lists by the end of this Parliament.

National Blood Service

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* hospitals and *(b)* NHS trusts have signed their annual contract with the National Blood Service (i) nationally and (ii) in each zone. [14456]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not collected in the form requested. However, details of the number of contracts signed for 1997–98 are as follows:

Zone	*Number*
London and South East	110
Midlands and South West	21
Northern	67
Total	198

A further 22 contracts have been agreed, but not yet signed.

To address the problems involved in the present arrangements, a working group has been set up to agree a common framework for commissioning and for national prices.

Air Pollution

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to the Under-Secretary of State's letter of 22 October, (MR/EE/PSO/14053/97), what interim action he is taking as a result of the Poloniecki study on air pollution. [14462]

Ms Jowell: The Poloniecki study on the effects of air pollution on heart disease is currently being considered by the Department of Health's Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants (COMEAP). I shall write to my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow with the Committee's views as soon as possible.

As part of the review of the National Air Quality Strategy the effects of carbon monoxide and particles on health will be examined. The Poloniecki study will form part of the research literature that will be considered.

Emergency Services

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the final report of the group led by the Chief Medical Officer into the provision of emergency services in the community will be published; and if he will make a statement. [14487]

Mr. Boateng: The report was published on 19 September this year under the title 'Developing Emergency Services in the Community: The Final report' and was distributed widely within the National Health Service under cover of an Executive Letter, EL(97)46. Copies of the report and the letter have been placed in the Library.

As part of the implementation programme, the Department of Health is funding telephone immediate care and advice lines to be piloted in three sites from early next year.

Prescription Charges

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review regulations whereby two or more prescription charges are payable when two or more medicines are prescribed in circumstances where medicines are in one pack and cannot be taken separately. [14698]

Mr. Milburn: This and all other aspects of prescription charges are being considered as part of the Department of Health's Comprehensive Spending Review. We aim to complete the review by next spring. The Government remain committed to the historic principle of the National Health Service that health services will be available to all and access will be based on need, not on ability to pay.

Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to announce the appointment of the next chairman of the Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust. [14473]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will shortly be considering recommendations for this post. An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

NHS Appointments

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what notice he plans to give to NHS trust and health authority members on their reappointment. [14583]

Mr. Milburn: We would normally prefer to give advance notice to serving members of National Health Service boards on whether they are to be reappointed. Trust appointments have been delayed this year because of the introduction of new criteria for board membership, and the need to consider new candidates arising from over 1,800 nominations by Members of Parliament and local authorities. Apart from exceptional cases, these appointments will be confirmed very shortly.

Health Authority Contracts

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list, by health care provider, for each of the last four years, the number of contracts each health authority had in place, indicating how many of these had been referred for arbitration within the NHS region; and how many were left unsigned by *(a)* the provider and *(b)* the purchaser at the end of the year to which they applied, or for 1997–98, at the end of October 1997. [14611]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested may be collected at a regional level but it is at the discretion of the regional office and is not authorised or validated centrally.

Solihull Hospital

Mr. John M. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the range of services provided to patients by Solihull Hospital. [13798]

Mr. Milburn: The range of services provided by Solihull Hospital is as follows:

Accident and Emergency services;

Outpatient Clinics for most specialities;

Day surgery;

Maternity services, including Special Care Baby Unit;

Diagnostic facilities, including a Magnetic Resonance Imaging scanner;

In-patient wards for emergency and elective admissions;

Coronary care and intensive therapy units;

Renal dialysis unit;

Acute mental health services.

Paint (Calcium Hydroxide)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what plans he has to encourage the use of paint containing calcium hydroxide on hospital *(a)* surfaces, *(b)* walls and *(c)* air ducts; and if he will make a statement; [13802]

(2) what assessment he has made of the benefits of coating hospital surfaces in paint containing calcium hydroxide in relation to the control of Staphylococcus aureus; and if he will make a statement; [13803]

(3) what assessment he has made of the benefits of coating the insides of hospital air ducts in paint containing calcium hydroxide in relation to the spread of Aspergillus niger; and if he will make a statement. [13804]

Mr. Milburn: The Department of Health is aware of the advances of technology in paint manufacture. The view of the Department's expert advisers is that wall and floor surfaces in hospitals, in practice, play little part in the transmission of infection, including Staphylococcus aureus. Aspergillus niger is a very uncommon cause of infection in hospitals. The source of such fungal spores is generally outside air.

Duct coating designed to inactivate suspended microbes will make insufficient contact to produce significant reduction in their numbers.

Patients with severely reduced immunity, such as bone marrow transplant patients, are particularly prone to A. niger. Units for such patients are generally supplied with air that has passed through High Efficiency Particulate Air filters, tested to British Standard BS3928, located in ductwork. Such filters are highly effective at removing airborne microbial contamination, including spores of A. niger.

Tissue Research

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce a national scheme to distribute human tissue unfit for transplant for use in research; and if he will make a statement. [13801]

Ms Jowell: The donation of human tissue for research purposes is permitted under the Human Tissue Act 1961. However, if a person (or his/her family) has given permission for organs to be taken for transplantation and those organs prove unsuitable for transplantation they cannot automatically be used for research purposes. Separate consent must be obtained.

Psychologists

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce legislation to control the activities of those calling themselves psychologists who have been struck off the Register of Psychologists. [13796]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have no current plans to introduce a system of statutory registration of the title psychologists. I recently met with representatives of the British Psychological Society and indicated the Government's intention for officials to work with them to develop a programme of work in order to ensure that existing systems for regulating and promoting good practice are maintained and developed.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 7 November 1997

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Opera

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when Sir Richard Eyre's working group on the future of the Royal Opera House and English National Opera will begin its work. [15307]

Mr. Chris Smith: Sir Richard has already begun work and hopes to finalise the membership of the working group shortly. He plans that the working group should meet later this month. On 6 November, Sir Richard issued an open consultation letter inviting views from all those with an interest, and who wish to contribute to this debate. The text of the letter, and of my letter to Sir Richard setting out in full the terms of reference for the review I have asked him to conduct, have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Late Payments

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the suppliers to his Department who are owed outstanding amounts, indicating the amounts and the due date on which the account should have been settled. [13541]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* All departments are required to pay all their bills within agreed contract terms, or 30 days from receipt of the goods or service or a valid invoice, whichever is later, where no such terms exist. Such detailed information on payment performance for the current financial year could be provided only at disproportionate cost. The Treasury will shortly be publishing a league table of departmental payment performance for 1996–97.

Tobacco Sponsorship

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the amount of money spent by tobacco companies on the sponsorship of *(a)* sport and *(b)* the arts in each of the last five years. [13745]

Mr. Banks: The amounts spent by tobacco companies on sports sponsorship in the last five years for which figures are available are:

	£
1995–96	7,412,000
1994–95	8,062,000
1993–94	7,576,000
1992–93	10,403,000
1991–92	8,981,000

These figures are provided under the Voluntary Agreement on Sponsorship of Sport by Tobacco Companies in the UK. Tobacco companies do not operate under similar arrangements with regard to arts sponsorship. However, the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts (ABSA) has recently estimated the total spread of tobacco companies' support for the arts in the UK to be around £1–1½ million per annum.

TREASURY

Cheques

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what legal penalties exist in other European Union countries for the issuing of cheques without covering funds. [13794]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The information is not available.

Press Officers

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total number of Treasury press officers at present; how many Treasury press officers have left their posts since 2 May; and if he will make a statement. [13367]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* There are currently six Treasury press officers. Since 2 May, two staff have moved from the Press Office and two staff have joined.

Tax Reclamation

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the total tax reclaimed by Government Departments, agencies and other public bodies in the latest year for which information is available; and if he will make a statement. [13534]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* From the tax returns submitted by Government departments and agencies during 1996–97, the total amount of value added tax due was £521 million, the total amount reclaimed was £1,500 million resulting in a balance repaid of £979 million. Figures for other public bodies are not available.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the amount of value added tax *(a)* reclaimed and *(b)* repaid to NHS trusts and other NHS bodies in the latest year for which statistics are available; and if he will make a statement. [13533]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* From the tax returns submitted by NHS trusts and bodies during 1996–97, the total amount of value added tax due was £72 million, the total amount reclaimed was £492 million resulting in a balance repaid of £420 million.

Tax Avoidance

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what directions he has given to Government Departments in relation to their expenditures on tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13532]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Guidance on tax avoidance was issued to departments in December 1996. This guidance warns departments against the use of tax advisers for tax avoidance purposes.

Savings

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect on the savings rate in the United Kingdom of increasing taxes on the income from savings; and if he will make a statement. [13030]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The effect would depend on the nature of the increase and how it was distributed.

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the effect on the savings rate in the United Kingdom of the elimination of the investment income surcharge. [13711]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The saving ratio is dependent on many factors which would make it very difficult to isolate the effect of abolishing the investment income surcharge.

Charities' Investment Income

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment the Government have made of the impact on charities' investment income of the changes in advance corporation tax announced in the last Budget. [14296]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The abolition of payment of tax credits on the dividends of UK companies will not affect charities until April 1999. Beyond that, charities will benefit from a five year scheme of special payments to ease the transition to the new treatment of dividends.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14390]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 5 November, *Official Report*, column *216*, by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

SCOTLAND

Curriculum Council

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the forthcoming policy and financial review of the Scottish Consultative Council on the curriculum. [15305]

Mr. Dewar: My Department will conduct a review of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum during 1997–98 under the programme of 5-yearly non-departmental public body reviews. This review will examine the justification for the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum on policy grounds and the system of financial management control within the Council.

The first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study. This will assess the extent to which the functions that the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum perform are necessary for the achievement of the Government's policies, and will examine thoroughly the scope for abolition, transferring part or all of the functions to another body, rationalisation, privatisation and continuation as an NDPB. The results of this prior options study will inform a detailed review of the Council's financial management and control systems.

The review will also examine the scope for co-ordination of the activities of the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum with other bodies to ensure maximum value for money from the central government resources available for education in Scotland.

The prior options study will commence in December 1997. In order to help ensure that all options are considered fully, comments are invited from interested parties.

Comments should be sent by 5 December 1997 to:

Mrs. S. Tait

Head of the Curriculum Branch

Teachers, Curriculum and Community Education Division

The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department

Area 2A/29

Victoria Quay

EDINBURGH

EH6 6QQ

Educational Technology Council

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement about the forthcoming policy and financial management review of the Scottish Council for Educational Technology. [15306]

Mr. Dewar: My Department will conduct a review of the Scottish Council for Educational Technology during 1997–98 under the programme of 5 yearly non-departmental public body reviews. The review will examine the status and functions of SCET in accordance with cabinet office guidance.

The first stage of the review will take the form of a "prior options" study. This will assess the extent to which the functions that SCET performs are necessary from the achievement of the Government's policies, and whether there is scope for privatising, contracting out or

transferring all, or part of their functions to another body or bodies. The results of the prior options study will inform a detailed review of its policy and financial management systems.

The review will also examine the scope for co-ordination of the activities of the Scottish Council for Educational Technology with other bodies to ensure maximum value for money from the central Government resources available for education in Scotland.

The prior options study will commence in early December 1997. In order to help ensure all options are considered fully, comments are invited from interested parties. Comments should be sent by 5 December 1997 to:

HMI Mrs. M. Browning

TERI Division

HMN Inspectors of Schools

The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department

Area 2–B91

Victoria Quay

EDINBURGH

EH6 6QQ

WALES

Referendum Voting

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list for *(a)* each of the county and county borough council areas and *(b)* Wales the percentage of the total registered electorate who voted (i) Yes and (ii) No, in the Assembly referendum; and if he will give the percentage turnout and the total number voting ranked by the percentage voting Yes. [14620]

Mr. Ron Davies: The information requested is as follows:

County/county borough	*Valid "yes" votes as percentage of electorate*	*Valid "no" votes as percentage of electorate*
Blaenau Gwent	27.7	21.7
Bridgend	27.5	23.1
Caerphilly	27.0	22.3
Cardiff	20.8	26.1
Carmarthenshire	36.8	19.6
Ceredigion	33.6	23.2
Conwy	21.1	30.4
Denbighshire	20.3	29.4
Flintshire	15.7	25.4
Gwynedd	38.3	21.5
Isle of Anglesey	29.0	27.9
Merthyr Tydfil	28.8	20.7
Monmouthshire	16.2	34.3
Neath Port Talbot	34.5	17.4
Newport	17,2	28.7
Pembrokeshire	22.5	30.1
Powys	24.0	32.2
Rhondda Cynon Taff	29.2	20.7
Swansea	24.5	22.6
Torfaen	22.7	22.8
Vale of Glamorgan	19.9	34.4
Wrexham	19.2	23.2
Wales total	25.2	24.9

County/county borough	*"Yes" votes as percentage of electorate*	*Percentage turnout*	*Total ballot papers counted (including rejected ballot papers)*
Gwynedd	38.3	60.0	55,467
Carmarthenshire	36.8	56.6	75,523
Neath Port Talbot	34.5	52.1	55,439
Ceredigion	33.6	57.1	31,103
Rhondda Cynon Taff	29.2	49.9	87,700
Isle of Anglesey	29.0	57.0	30,830
Merthyr Tydfil	28.8	49.8	21,950
Blaenau Gwent	27.7	49.6	27,312
Bridgend	27.5	50.8	51,053
Caerphilly	27.0	49.5	63,927
Swansea	24.5	47.3	82,701
Powys	24.0	56.5	54,269
Torfaen	22.7	45.6	31,700
Pembrokeshire	22.5	52.8	46,847
Conwy	21.1	51.6	45,020
Cardiff	20.8	47.0	107,523
Denbighshire	20.3	49.9	35,102
Vale of Glamorgan	19.9	54.5	48,538
Wrexham	19.2	42.5	41,099
Newport	17.2	46.1	43,335
Monmouthshire	16.2	50.7	33,111
Flintshire	15.7	41.1	46,571
Wales total	25.2	50.3	1,116,120

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14956]

Mr. Ron Davies: My Department has had no contacts with the Monitor Consultancy.

NORTHERN IRELAND

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the concluding observations pertaining to Northern Ireland made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child following examination of the United Kingdom periodic report in January 1995; and if she will list the progress made in addressing each of the committee's concerns. [13068]

Mr. Worthington *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The concluding observations made in respect of Northern Ireland relate to a range of issues: the impact on children of emergency legislation; juvenile justice; children in training schools; race relations legislation; and integrated and Irish medium education. I shall deal with each in turn.

Emergency legislation

The Committee expressed concern about the lack of information on the difficulties experienced by children living in Northern Ireland and the effect on children of the operation of emergency legislation.

The legislation to enable the security forces and the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland to deal effectively with terrorism seeks to combine operational utility and public acceptability by providing measures which are appropriate and proportionate to the threat of terrorism, while at the same time

protecting the rights of individuals. While there has been no official assessment of the particular impact on children of the emergency legislation in Northern Ireland, special safeguards have been introduced into the statutory codes of practice governing the detention, treatment and questioning of people under the terrorism provisions. These ensure that in the rare event of the police having to interview anyone who appears to be under 17, the well-being and rights of the interviewee are given the highest priority. Among the special safeguards is a requirement that they must be accompanied by an appropriate adult.

The emergency legislation permits a constable or member of the security forces to stop and search any person in specific circumstances laid down in legislation. If it is necessary to search a child under 14 this is normally done by a female police officer or a female soldier. For a juvenile older than this, the search is carried out by a police officer or soldier of the same sex. Any allegation of unprofessional behaviour by a member of the security forces is treated very seriously. Procedures exist for dealing with such complaints and are widely publicised, although allegations of harassment against children have been very rare.

The emergency legislation is independently reviewed and renewed annually following debates in Parliament. The Government has recently launched a major review of counter-terrorism legislation in the United Kingdom. The aim is to end the present temporary arrangements and produce permanent legislation which will deal with all kinds of terrorism, including international terrorism.

Juvenile justice

The Committee concerned that the Training School ethos appeared to lay emphasis on imprisonment and punishment. A proposal for a draft Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order was published in February this year. The draft legislation has been prepared as part of a developing juvenile justice strategy. An important part of that strategy is to reduce the number of young people in custody. Custody will be restricted to those who have committed a serious offence or who pose a serious danger to the public. In all criminal proceedings the court will be required to have regard to the welfare of the child before ordering any disposal. At present the only custodial disposal available to the courts for all but the most serious offences is the training school order, which authorises detention for an indeterminate period of up to two years—the indeterminate nature of the sentence was another of the Committee's concerns. The proposed legislation will abolish the training school order and replace it with a new juvenile justice centre order. This would be for a determinate period between six months and two years, only half of which would be spent in custody, with the lower end of the range being the norm. It is intended that while in custody children will be given education and training to help them adapt to a return to the community and to reduce the risk of re-offending. They will be supported in this by a period of supervision.

Children in care

The Committee was also concerned that children in care could be held in training schools. Following the commencement of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order in November 1996 it is no longer possible for a child in Northern Ireland to be placed in a training school on care grounds.

Race relations

The Committee recommended that race relations legislation be introduced in Northern Ireland. The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 came fully into operation on 4 August 1997. The legislation replicates the GB Act and makes discrimination on racial grounds unlawful in employment, training, education, the provision of goods, facilities and services, and the disposal and management of premises. The Irish Traveller community is defined as a racial group for the purposes of the Order. A Commission for Racial Equality for Northern Ireland has been established to help enforce the legislation and to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of different racial groups.

Education

The Committee advocated further support for teaching the Irish language in schools and for integrated education.

In order to meet the statutory requirements of the Language Studies area of the study of Northern Ireland Curriculum, pupils must study one of the following: French, German, Italian, Spanish or Irish. It is for schools to make provision in response to demand from pupils.

A growing number of parents in Northern Ireland are choosing to have their children educated through the Irish language. Irish-medium schools may achieve grant-aided status under the same procedures as other school sectors. Since 1995 four primary schools and one secondary school have been given grant-aided status. There are now eight grant-aided Irish-medium schools with a combined enrolment of over 1,100 pupils, 95 per cent. of all pupils in Irish-medium schools are attending grant-aided schools.

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order places a statutory duty on the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education, which it defines as "the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils". Under this legislation new integrated schools qualify for Government grants immediately provided they meet a number of criteria including minimum viability levels. In addition procedures are in place for transforming existing schools to integrated status; these may be initiated directly by parents.

When the Order became law in 1990 there were only seven grant-aided integrated schools; five primary and two secondary. Today there are 33, of which 11 are secondary schools. Their combined enrolment is just over 7,000 pupils, which represents around two per cent. of total pupil numbers. The rate of growth in the sector will be determined by parental demand; there will be no question of Government imposing integration.

The Department of Education will issue guidelines on transformation to integrated status to all schools later this year. These should provide a further stimulus to the growth of the sector.

Information Service

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for the future of the Information Service in Northern Ireland. [15429]

Marjorie Mowlam: A review of Information Services in Northern Ireland was presented to me on Wednesday 5 November. A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

The review recommends that the role and approach of the Northern Ireland Information Service should continue to be consistent with the traditional core principles and approach of government information work. I agree. It is important that the professional reputation of the Northern Ireland Information Service for accuracy, impartiality and objective presentation of the Government's policies be maintained. Its staff have provided loyal, committed and professional service to successive Governments through some of the most difficult and traumatic events.

At the same time, the review sets out a vision for the Information Service: centrally placed at the heart of the Government in Northern Ireland, taking a strategic approach, active in promoting the Government's policies as well as reactive, and delivering an up-to-date service to the media, consistent with the professional requirements for accuracy, impartiality and objectivity.

I endorse this approach. In particular, as recommended by the review, the posts of Director of Communications and Head of News will be filled by open competition ensuring transparent selection procedures supervised by the Civil Service Commission.

DEFENCE

Ministry Houses

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will establish how many former Ministry of Defence houses at Colchester, sold to Annington Homes, have been re-sold by the company together with the average sale price; and what was the average price received by the Government when the houses were sold. [13704]

Mr. Spellar: At the time of the sale 46 houses at Colchester were transferred freehold to Annington Homes. The price for individual properties was not separately negotiated but was part of the total sale and leasing package, the receipt for which was £1.662 billion. Once properties are released to Annington Homes, questions relating to resale prices are a matter for that company, but the contract between Annington Homes and MOD provides for a share of the profits obtained from resale to be paid to the Exchequer. Over £1 million from the profit share arrangements within the Annington Homes contract has already been received.

Assets Review

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence to what time scale the review of his Department's assets is being conducted; how much the review is expected to cost; and if he will make a statement. [14104]

Dr. Reid: The review of defence assets is part of the Strategic Defence Review, work on which is expected to be completed around the turn of the year. We are seeking to ensure that all assets are used with maximum efficiency, and that any surplus is identified and disposed of. The work is being undertaken mainly through existing structures. Some extra costs will be incurred, for example in the process of outside consultation, but it is too early to predict the total.

Britannia

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the cost of the farewell voyage of HMS Britannia and its escort vessel. [14416]

Dr. Reid: The estimated additional cost of the farewell voyage of HMY Britannia and its escort vessel is some £157,000.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Visas

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received concerning delays in processing visa applications at Islamabad. [14230]

Mr. Fatchett: We have received many representations expressing concern at the delays in processing visa applications at Islamabad. The majority of these resulted from computer problems which have now been resolved.

Our correspondence statistics are not broken down in such a way as to be able to give precise figures of representations on this specific subject.

Procurement Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the visas granted to military, security, police, paramilitary or special forces personnel invited by *(a)* the British Government and *(b)* private companies to attend the 1997 contingency and operational procurement exhibition at Farnborough. [14404]

Mr. Fatchett: The information requested is not systematically recorded and is not therefore available.

Immigration (Shahzad Ali)

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when his Department will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Bradford, North of 30 July, 29 August, 11 September, 1 October and 17 October concerning the case of Shahzad Ali, reference IMM/D0887. [14734]

Mr. Fatchett: The letters referred to by my hon. Friend were answered on 5 November 1997.

Cuba

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received in respect of commemorating the 40th anniversary of the revolution in Cuba. [14813]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I have received no representations in respect of commemorating the 40th anniversary of the revolution in Cuba.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Green Pound

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many representations he has received in the last 12 months on the impact of Green Pound fluctuations on agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [14079]

Mr. Rooker: The Department has received about 90 written representations on the impact of Green Pound fluctuations on agriculture. Ministers and officials have also received delegations from farming and farm-related organisations on several occasions.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what consideration is currently being given to an application for European funds to offset the effects of Green Pound price fluctuations on agricultural prices and subsidies; and if he will make a statement. [14164]

Mr. Rooker: Paying this aid would have significant implications for UK public expenditure. We are keeping the case for payment under review but, on the evidence currently available, have concluded that the case for payment is at present not proven.

Tail Docking (Prosecutions)

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions for tail docking have taken place since the 1994 Welfare of Livestock Regulations were enacted; and if he will make a statement. [14690]

Mr. Morley: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen, West and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column *38*.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14957]

Mr. Morley: From records held centrally, the Department has not entered into any contracts with the Monitor Consultancy and is not aware of any discussions with the company.

Regional Panels

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list for each of the former MAFF regional panels the names of the members at the time of their dissolution, the organisations they represented and their contact addresses. [14771]

Mr. Rooker: The names and contact addresses of the members of the nine MAFF Regional Panels at the time of their disbandment are listed below.

Panel members were appointed in a personal capacity and not as formal representatives of any organisation.

	Contact address
Anglia region	
Mr. J. Wallace (Chairman)	The Secretary
Mrs. A. C. Chamberlain	Anglia Regional Panel
Miss C. E. Chivers	Block B
Mr. J. Cousins	Government Buildings
Mr. E. A. Davies	Brooklands Avenue
Mrs. J. Duffield	Cambridge CB2 2DR
Mr. D. Moore	
Mr. J. Shropshire OBE	
Mr. R. Torrance	
East Midlands region	
Mr. W. S. Hemington	The Secretary
(Chairman)	East Midlands Regional Panel
Mr. R. Bealby	Block 7
Mr. M. Calvert	Government Buildings
Dr. J. Carmichael	Chalfont Drive
Mr. C. Dobson	Nottingham NG8 3SN
Mrs. J. Gilman	
Mr. C. J. F. Matts	
Dr. M. Seabrook	
Mr. R. Southgate	
North East region	
Professor R. C. Ward	The Secretary
(Chairman)	North East Regional Panel
Mr. R. Betton	Government Buildings
Mr. J. R. Durdy	Crosby Road
Miss D. U. Fairburn	Northallerton
Mr. J. P. Stephenson	North Yorkshire DL6 1AD
Mrs. R. Wass	
Mr. S. P. S. Wharton	
North Mercia region	
Mrs. A. Williams CBE	The Secretary
(Chairman)	North Mercia Regional Panel
Mr. V. J. Croxson	Berkeley Towers
Mrs. E. Cummins	Merrivale Road
Mr. M. Dugdale	Crewe
Mr. J. J. Frost	Cheshire CW2 6PT
Mr. F. Gribble MBE	
Mr. N. H. Moore	
Mr. T. D. Prince	
Mr. W. Snelson	
Mr. T. Wilson	
Northern region	
Mr. A. Wannop (Chairman)	The Secretary
Ms R. Barber	Northern Regional Panel
Mr. J. Howson	Eden Bridge House
Mr. A. Humphries	Lowther Street
Mr. P. W. Lansdale	Carlisle CA3 8DX
Dr. R. S. Smith	
Mr. R. Thornton	
Mr. A. Walling	
Mr. G. Wilson	
South East region	
Mr. R. Holland (Acting	The Secretary
Chairman)	South East Regional Panel
Mr. P. Chamberlain	Block A
Mr. C. Frampton	Government Buildings
Miss J. Greenall	Coley Park
Mr. C. A. Hyde	Reading
Mr. D. A. Rees	Berkshire RG1 6DT
Mr. R. W. Shepherd	
South Mercia region	
Mrs. J. Goodman (Chairman)	The Secretary
Mr. F. Hart	South Mercia Regional Panel
Mr. C. J. Harvey	Block C
Mr. J. H. Marsden	Government Buildings
Mr. W. Meadows	Whittington Road
Mrs. E. Morgan	Worcester WR5 2LQ
Mr. G. Revill	
Mr. D. W. Smith	
Mr. R. E. P. Vines	
South West region	
Mr. P. Lethbridge (Chairman)	The Secretary
Mr. S. Best	South West Regional Panel
Mrs. H. E. Bowker	Government Buildings
Miss D. Clark	Alphington Road
Mr. J. T. French	Exeter EX2 8NQ
Mrs. M. Horrell	
Mrs. F. E. Luscombe	
Mr. A. May	
Mr. A. Pomeroy	
Wessex region	
Mr. R. Lawton CBE (Chairman)	The Secretary
Mr. R. E. J. Bernays	Wessex Regional Panel
Ms H. Browning	Block 3
Mrs. L. M. Cook	Government Buildings
Mr. O. Edwards	Burghill Road

	Contact address
Mr. R. J. A. Martin Mrs. J. Small Mrs. A. Streatfeild Mr. J. Webber JP	Westbury on Trym Bristol BS10 6NJ

Cattle Slaughter

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provisions he is making for cattle slaughtered for human consumption after 1 January 1998, if they were born before 1 July 1996 and have no passport. [14773]

Mr. Rooker: Cattle born before 1 July 1996 are not required to have a passport. Cattle passports were only introduced for cattle born or imported into Great Britain from 1 July 1996; therefore cattle born before this date and presented for slaughter within 30 months are eligible to enter the human food chain.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Sewage Outlets

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria are used by the Environment Agency to decide whether a sewage outlet is high risk. [14039]

Angela Eagle: Criteria to decide whether an effluent should be considered "critical" are set out in the Environment Agency Discharge Consent Manual. These include cases where the effluent is contributing to non-achievement of a water quality objective (including those implementing EC Directives); where it may adversely affect water quality at an abstraction point for potable supply; and where it may adversely affect Sites of Special Scientific Interest or substantial fisheries.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many sewage outlets were not sampled by the Environment Agency because they were not deemed high risk in each year since the Agency's establishment. [14038]

Angela Eagle: Relevant information is not yet available for the period since the establishment in April 1996 of the Environment Agency. However, in 1995 the National Rivers Authority sampled 6,408 out of 7,429 sewage discharges with numeric consents and monitored 1,532 out of 1,786 water company sewage treatment works with descriptive consents. Intermittent discharges from combined sewer overflows, of which there are estimated to be some 25,000, are considerably diluted by rainwater and are routinely monitored by the Agency only in areas of exceptionally high amenity value. However, the design and construction of new and refurbished storm water overflows is controlled on a site specific basis by the Agency on the principle that the frequency of discharge should be related to the dilution available and the uses made of the receiving water.

Noise Control

Mr. MacGregor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to develop policies to reduce road and rail traffic noise, in respect of recommendations contained in the twentieth report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. [14425]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government is concerned about the impact of noise pollution generally and is aware of the increasing public concern about both road traffic noise and, to a lesser extent, rail noise. It is exploring a range of policy options to mitigate the impact of noise on the environment, and will take the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution's report into account in its work towards a White Paper on integrated transport.

Non-lead Shot

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State's letter of 13 October, (EE/PSO/13302/97), what consultation is taking place with the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices and other Governments Departments on encouragement of the use of non-lead shot. [14461]

Angela Eagle: My Department has consulted a wide range of Government Departments, including the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices, about the issue concerning the phase out of lead shot over wetlands.

Road Accidents

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the total number of road accidents that occur every year where a contributory cause was the uncorrected eyesight of one or more drivers. [14493]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No information is currently collected nationally on causation factors in road accidents. It is not therefore possible to supply the specific information requested.

Cockpit Voice Recorders

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the letter T/PSO/5874/97 of 15 July, to the hon. Member for Linlithgow, what progress has been made in research into the use of the CVR to differentiate between bomb blasts and structural failure. [14501]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A study has recently been completed by the Institute of Sound and Vibration Research at Southampton University into Cockpit Voice Recorder Transient Signatures. The results of this study have been produced in a report which has been made available to the Department. The conclusions are currently under consideration by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch.

Road and Bridge Tolls

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment

he has made of the environmental benefits of increased tolls on specific roads and bridges; and if he will make a statement. [14448]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* No such assessment has been undertaken and there are at present no plans to do so.

West Coast Main Line

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with the Director of Passenger Rail Franchising to discuss *(a)* punctuality targets and *(b)* standards of service on the Virgin Trains west coast main line franchise. [14776]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have discussed these and other issues at my regular meetings with the Franchising Director. Punctuality targets and standards of service are a matter for the Franchising Director to address with the Train Operating Company.

Railways (Hygiene Standards)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce targets for rail franchise holders to encompass standards of cleanliness and hygiene for on-board services. [14778]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a matter for the Franchising Director. The franchise agreements require franchise operators to carry out regular surveys of customer satisfaction and to seek an overall improvement in satisfaction during the franchise term. The aspects monitored vary from franchise to franchise and the Franchising Director may require other aspects to be added to the surveys during the franchise. The majority of franchise operators currently monitor certain aspects of train cleanliness. None specifically monitor hygiene of on-board catering services, though normal health and safety requirements apply.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14946]

Angela Eagle: (a) The Department has not entered into any contracts with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990.

(b) I am unaware of any discussions that Ministers or officials of this department have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990.

Railways (Punctuality and Reliability)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he intends to take to ensure that rail franchise holders meet their specified targets for punctuality and reliability. [14777]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is a matter for the Franchising Director, through enforcement of the terms of franchise agreements. The Government's task is to improve the railways. We will establish more effective and accountable regulation by the Rail Regulator. We will ensure that the public subsidy serves the public interest, and will establish a new rail authority combining the functions currently carried out by the Franchising Director and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to provide a clear, coherent and strategic programme for the development of the railways, so that passenger expectations are met. As a first step we have announced several new measures including new Objectives, Instructions and Guidance for the Franchising Director and a voluntary Concordat with the Rail Regulator. The Franchising Director's new Objectives make it his principal aim to win more passengers on to the railway, secure improvements in the quality of rail services and manage franchise contracts tightly in the public interest.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Mr. Randhir Singh

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost to public funds of the removal of Mr. R. Singh of Spalding street, Leicester. [13982]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Mr. Randhir Singh was removed from the United Kingdom to India on 27 October 1997 at public expense. The price of the airline ticket was £535.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the refusal of the custody sergeant at Charles street police station, Leicester to allow the hon. Member for Leicester East to see Mr. R. Singh except with a police officer present. [13980]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Code of Practice for the Detention, Treatment and Questioning of Persons by Police Officers (Code C), issued under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, does not apply to people who have been served a notice advising them of their detention under powers contained in the Immigration Act 1971. However, whilst in police custody, the custody officer has a general responsibility for the welfare and security of persons held in police cells.

When a person is held by the police on behalf of another agency, the custody officer has a discretion on visits which may be made to the person taking account of any concerns about potential dangers either to the detained person or to others.

My hon. Friend will be aware that I supported his request to visit Charles street Police Station and see his constituent. I am writing to the Chief Constable seeking an explanation and I will write to my hon. Friend in due course.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines exist for the police in respect of the removal of illegal immigrants. [13979]

Mr. Michael: Home Office Circular 38/1995 Police and Immigration Service Joint Enquiries contains guidance for the chief officer of police. It draws attention

to the recommendations contained in the Joint Review of Procedures in Immigration Removal Cases, which was completed by senior officers of the Metropolitan Police and the Immigration Service in January 1994, and in which the Association of Chief Police Officers also participated. Additionally the circular gives broad guidance to the police on the conduct of immigration inquiries.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many removals to other countries of illegal immigrants his Department has authorised since 1 May. [14007]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The number of illegal entrants removed from the United Kingdom, including voluntary departures after illegal entry action had been initiated, between 1 May 1997 and 30 September 1997 was 2,015. This does not include persons removed as a result of deportation action or under port refusal procedures.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answers and those of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, of 27 October *Official Report*, column *572*, which articles of the Dublin convention 1991 *(a)* negate the terms of the Asylum Act 1996 and *(b)* make it more complex and more difficult to implement the bi-lateral agreement that allows the United Kingdom to return economic migrants to France. [13702]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Dublin Convention provides criteria for determining which member state should consider an asylum application made in the European Union and procedures for transferring applicants between member states. Where another member state accepts that it is responsible for an application made in the United Kingdom, the Secretary of State can refuse and remove the applicant to that State, making use, where appropriate, of the provisions of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 concerning safe third country asylum cases. As a matter of international law, we are unable to remove asylum seekers to European Union member states on safe third country grounds other than in accordance with the Dublin Convention.

The readmission agreement we have with France explicitly provides for its provisions to be superseded by the Dublin Convention in so far as they apply to asylum seekers. It remains possible to return persons to France under the readmission agreement where they are not asylum seekers and do not meet the requirements of the Immigration Rules.

Senior Police Officers (Leicestershire)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to improve the out-of-hours service of the Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable and Assistant Chief Constable of Leicestershire. [13929]

Mr. Michael: The out-of-hours service of the Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable and Assistant Chief Constable of Leicestershire is an operational matter for the police.

Procurement Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the police and Ministry of Defence police costs associated with the recent contingency and operational procurement exhibition held at Farnborough Aerospace indicating if these costs were recovered from the exhibition organiser. [14403]

Mr. Michael: I understand from the Chief Constable of Hampshire that the cost of policing around the Farnborough Aerodrome was £53,550. As Hampshire Constabulary policing commitment lay outside of the aerodrome site no charge was made by them.

The additional Ministry of Defence Police costs incurred by the recent Contingency and Operational Procurement Exhibition are a matter for my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Defence. I have asked him to write to you on those aspects of your Question which relate to his responsibilities.

Airports (Immigration Staff)

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what circumstances Her Majesty's immigration service is permitted to waive the requirement to provide staff at all United Kingdom airport terminals. [14251]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is not a requirement of the Immigration Act 1971 for immigration officers to be present at an airport terminal building. The Act provides for the Secretary of State to designate control areas for the embarkation and disembarkation of passengers in any port and for the port operator to take all reasonable steps to secure that notified conditions and restrictions which apply to a designated area are observed.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the United Kingdom airports at which Her Majesty's immigration staff are employed, together with the number of immigration officers employed at each. [14250]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The details requested are set out below.

Port	*Number of immigration officers on 1 October 1997*
Gatwick North	132.7
Gatwick South	135.4
Heathrow Terminal 1	147.2
Heathrow Terminal 2	160.7
Heathrow Terminal 3	243.7
Heathrow Terminal 4	157.2
Brize Norton	3
Aberdeen	5.3
Belfast	5.6
Edinburgh	5
Glasgow	22
Humberside	3.6
Newcastle	8
Leeds Bradford	11.6
Manchester Tn1	33.2
Manchester Tn2	30.5
Birmingham	28.5
East Midlands	14
Luton	18.1
Mildenhall	3
Southend	1
Stansted	47.6

Port	Number of immigration officers on 1 October 1997
London City	13.1
Cambridge	1
Bournemouth	4
Bristol	10

In the above table there are certain offices which cover both seaports and airports. Immigration officers also attend other airports as necessary.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criteria are used to determine the number of Her Majesty's immigration staff employed at each of the United Kingdom's airports. [14249]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The deployment of Immigration Service operational staff at airports is determined by a number of factors. These include the pattern and timing of flight movements, the volume and nature of passenger traffic together with other control demands such as clandestine entry and asylum casework.

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of Her Majesty's immigration service costs arising from duties undertaken at United Kingdom airports is charged to airports; and what proportion is borne by public funds. [14248]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The cost of staffing the immigration control at both ports and airports in the United Kingdom, in accordance with the requirements laid down by the Secretary of State, is met entirely from public funds.

The Immigration Service charges for the provision of additional immigration services under section 9(4) of the Immigration Act 1988. The total receipts generated by these services for 1997–98 are expected to make up about 3.5 per cent. of the resources available to the Immigration Service Ports Directorate. I am unable to provide a disaggregation of the proportion of receipts between airports and other locations because to do so would risk breaching commercial confidentiality.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to improve the out-of-hours service of the immigration office at East Midlands airport. [13928]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The immigration office at East Midlands airport is staffed 24 hours a day. The uneven pattern of passenger arrivals means that there are times when only one immigration officer is required on duty. However, when that officer is unable to answer telephone calls immediately because of operational duties away from the office an answerphone service is provided. I do not have any plans to change this arrangement, which generally works well.

Immigration and Nationality Inquiry Desk

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many personal callers there were to the public inquiry desk at each branch of the immigration and nationality department on 1 October. [14241]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: On 1 October, the number of applicants at the public enquiry offices of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate was:

	Number
Belfast	20
Birmingham	122
Croydon Public Enquiry Office	884
Croydon Asylum Screening Unit	241
Glasgow	62
Liverpool	52

Police Discipline

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers have been *(a)* cautioned, *(b)* dismissed and *(c)* charged for inappropriate behaviour while on duty, listing in each case the (i) rule breached and (ii) police force involved. [14438]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The information available, covering the period April 1996 to March 1997, is contained in the table below. Figures relate to disciplinary cases which result in a punishment being awarded—they do not include those in which police officers were charged but found not guilty or the charges not pursued. Information on the rule breached, and whether the offence was committed whilst the officer was on or off duty is not collected centrally.

Most serious punishment awarded as a result of disciplinary proceedings 1996–97

Police force	Number of officers			
	Dismissal	Caution	Other	Total
Avon and Somerset	0	4	3	7
Bedfordshire	0	0	3	3
Cambridgeshire	1	1	2	4
Cheshire	1	2	2	5
Cleveland	1	2	3	6
Cumbria	0	0	1	1
Derbyshire	0	2	1	3
Devon and Cornwall	0	3	18	21
Dorset	0	0	6	6
Durham	1	1	1	3
Essex	0	0	7	7
Gloucestershire	1	0	4	5
Greater Manchester	0	1	9	10
Hampshire	1	1	10	12
Hertfordshire	0	1	4	5
Humberside	3	0	12	15
Kent	0	3	15	18
Lancashire	0	2	0	2
Leicestershire	0	0	9	9
Lincolnshire	0	0	0	0
City of London	0	1	2	3
Merseyside	0	2	10	12
Metropolitan Police	12	8	69	89
Norfolk	1	2	5	8
Northamptonshire	0	1	1	2
Northumbria	0	3	5	8
North Yorkshire	1	0	7	8
Nottinghamshire	2	0	13	15
South Yorkshire	3	1	3	7
Staffordshire	0	0	4	4
Suffolk	1	0	3	4
Surrey	1	0	0	1
Sussex	0	7	12	19
Thames Valley	1	1	1	3
Warwickshire	0	0	1	1
West Mercia	0	0	5	5
West Midlands	6	0	15	21

Most serious punishment awarded as a result of disciplinary proceedings 1996–97

Police force	Number of officers			
	Dismissal	Caution	Other	Total
West Yorkshire	0	0	13	13
Wiltshire	0	0	0	0
Dyfed Powys	0	0	3	3
Gwent	0	0	4	4
North Wales	0	0	0	0
South Wales	0	0	5	5
Total	37	49	291	377

Party Conferences (Security)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of security arrangements for each party political conference held in 1997; and what was such expenditure in each of the preceding three years. [13084]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The information requested is set out in the table. In 1996, Dorset Police was given £1.5 million, and this year Lancashire Constabulary and Sussex Police were each given £750,000 in extra Government funding as a contribution towards the additional costs of safeguarding national security at Party conferences in their area.

Cost of policing Party Conferences

£

Force	1997	1996	1995	1994
Conservative Party				
Lancashire	[1]2.5–3 million	—	[2]662,000	—
Dorset	—	2,847 million	—	2,671 million
Labour Party				
Sussex[2]	[1]2 million	—	32,000	—
Lancashire	—	2,620 million	—	[2]90,000
Liberal Democrat Party				
Nottinghamshire	—	Nil	—	—
North Yorkshire	—	—	Nil	—
South Wales	380	—	—	Nil
Sussex[2]	Nil	6,000	—	3,500

[1] Estimate.

[2] Lancashire Constabulary and Sussex Police are only able to provide additional costs which are essentially overtime, transport and accommodation costs.

In addition, some security expenditure incurred by the political parties on the advice of the police can be recovered from the Home Office in accordance with section 170 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. The reimbursed costs are set out in the table:

£

Year	Conservative Party	Labour Party
1994	463,165	153,449
1995	533,392	65,000
1996	554,806	528,773
1997	n/a	n/a

n/a = not available.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many complaints were made concerning security arrangements at each party conference. [13085]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 November]:* Fourteen written complaints were made in relation to the security arrangements at the Labour Party conference in Brighton this year. I am not aware of any complaints made in relation to security at the Conservative or Liberal Democrat party conferences.

Animal Experiments

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on developments concerning the use of animals in scientific procedures. [14902]

Mr. George Howarth: My noble Friend made an announcement yesterday and a copy of a supplementary note to my right hon. Friend's response to the Animal Procedures Committee's interim report on its review of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 was placed in the Library.

Law on Disclosure

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the law on disclosure; and if he will make a statement. [12645]

Mr. Michael *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The new disclosure provisions introduced by the Criminal Procedure and Investigation Act 1996 came into effect on 1 April 1997 but only apply to criminal proceedings arising from investigations begun on or after that date. Therefore, cases subject to the new procedures have only been coming before the courts in the last three or four months. I understand that the Crown Prosecution Service is in the process of undertaking its own evaluation of the new provisions, which it expects to complete early next year. In the light of that exercise, I will assess the need for a further evaluation of the provisions.

Security Screening (Hotels)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he intends to take to ensure that security screening of hotel and boarding house guests does not discriminate against those of Irish origin. [13086]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The basis for any inquiries made by the police in the course of their duties is an operational matter for the chief constable concerned. It is open to anyone who considers that he has been dealt with improperly to make a complaint to the chief constable. If the complainant is not satisfied with the response he receives, he may refer the matter to the Police Complaints Authority.

Samia Batol Shah

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when his Department will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Bradford, North of 5 September, 1 October and 18 October concerning the case of Samia Batol Shah, reference PO5094/97. [14735]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I replied to my hon. Friend on 5 November.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the nature and value

of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14952]

Mr. Straw: There is no record of the Home Office entering into any contracts, or having discussions with, the Monitor Consultancy during the period in question.

Fire Service

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 30 October, *Official Report*, column *842*, concerning Fire Service attendance times, from what point attendance times are calculated. [14924]

Mr. George Howarth: Guidance issued by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Fire Services requests brigades to start measuring attendance times from the time of assignment of fire appliances by the brigade's control (the point at which the send button is pressed by the control operator).

Greater London Authority

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what will be the hours during which polling stations in London will be open for electors during the London local government elections and referendum in May 1998. [14775]

Mr. George Howarth: The hours of polling at the London borough local elections on 7 May 1998 will be between 08.00 am and 09.00 pm at night. The Government intend to provide for polling for the referendum on the Greater London Authority also to be held on that day. The polling hours for the referendum will be the same as those for the London borough local elections.

Polling Stations (Schools)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many schools were *(a)* closed and *(b)* part-closed for use as polling stations on 1 May; and how many and what percentage of pupils were affected. [14678]

Mr. George Howarth: This information is not collected centrally.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Lone Parents

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the control groups operating to measure the effect of her New Deal for Lone Parents scheme contain lone parents who are not taking part in the scheme. [14686]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The New Deal for Lone Parents has been introduced in eight initial phase areas. Lone parents whose youngest child is at school are invited for interviews with their personal advisers who provide "better-off" calculations and individually tailored advice. Lone parents with pre-school children can volunteer for the New Deal.

Measurement of the effects of the New Deal for Lone Parents will rely on control areas rather than control groups. The control areas closely match the New Deal areas. The New Deal for lone parents will be evaluated by a consortium led by Social and Community Planning Research, an independent research institute together with the Institute of Employment Relations at Warwick University and the university of Bath. The impact of the scheme will be measured by comparing outcomes for lone parents in the New Deal areas with the outcomes for a similar, but geographically separate group of lone parents in the control areas. None of the lone parents in the control areas will be eligible for the New Deal.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what public funding was provided to the Gingerbread Group to participate in the press conference to launch the Moving Foward document. [14685]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Gingerbread did not receive any public funds for attending the press conference which launched the Moving Forward document.

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what are the detailed objectives for the control groups operating to measure the effect of her New Deal for Lone Parents scheme; and, if so, if she will list what these are; [14926]

(2) when she started the control groups to measure the effect of her New Deal for Lone Parents scheme, in each of the areas in which they are operating; [14928]

(3) what are the terms of reference for the control groups in the New Deal for Lone Parents scheme; and how they differ from those of the last Government's Parent Plus scheme; [14925]

(4) what is her definition of control group with respect to those being used in the New Deal for Lone Parents scheme; [14927]

(5) for what reasons the control groups in the New Deal for Lone Parents scheme did not start with the scheme itself. [14929]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The New Deal for Lone Parents will fulfil the Government's commitment to provide help to lone parents to get off benefit and into work. The programme has been introduced in the following eight Benefits Agency districts:

North Surrey
North Worcestershire
North Cheshire
Cambridgeshire
Warwickshire
Clyde Valley
Cardiff and Vale
Sheffield East

These areas have been carefully selected to represent areas of high, medium and low unemployment and to have typical caseloads of lone parents. Untypical areas were excluded.

The impact of the first phase of the New Deal for Lone Parents will be measured by comparing outcomes for lone parents in the New Deal areas with the outcomes for a similar, but geographically separate group of lone parents

in control areas where the New Deal service is not yet available. These control areas are the Benefits Agency districts of:

Manchester Central
Glasgow Springburn and Cumbernauld
Blackburn and Accrington
Leicestershire North
Wiltshire
Buckinghamshire

Any additional movements into work in the New Deal areas over and above that which occurs in the control areas can be attributed to the New Deal itself, after allowing for changes in the local labour markets. The objectives of the control areas are, therefore, to provide a benchmark by which to assess the impact of the New Deal.

Administrative data for the control areas is being collected from the same date as that for the New Deal areas. This data will be collected for the duration of the New Deal and beyond. Carefully selected samples of lone parents in the control areas will be interviewed, as will lone parents in the New Deal areas.

The Parent Plus service would have only been available to half of the one parents on Income Support in each of the pilot areas. The impact of Parent Plus would have been measured by comparing movements into work amongst those offered the service (the action group) against those lone parents in the same area who were not offered the service (the control group).

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts her Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14950]

Mr. Field: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The Department of Social Security and its Executive Agencies has not entered into any contracts with Monitor Consultancy since 1993–94 (the latest for which information is available). Neither Ministers nor Departmental Officials have had discussions with them.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Credits Guarantee Department

Mr. Colvin: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many Land Rovers have been supplied to which Baltic states in each of the last five years; and if they have received ECGD cover. [13908]

Mrs. Beckett: From the data readily available, in the last five years ECGD has supported the following contracts, in relation to Land Rover Vehicles, to Baltic States:

(i) in 1994 the supply of 100 second hand Land Rovers value US$0.7 million to Latvia;

(ii) in 1996 the supply of 97 Land Rovers Defender Vehicles value £1.3 million to Lithuania

(iii) in 1997 the supply of 152 Land Rovers Defender/Discover Vehicles value £2.2 million to Lithuania

We do not have the total number of vehicles exported during these years.

Energy and Environmental Education

Mr. Stunell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans her Department has to review its relationship with non-governmental organisations involved in energy and environmental education. [12544]

Mr. Battle: I have no plans for such a review. My Department will play a full role in the Expert Panel on Sustainable Education announced by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment on 18 September 1997. This panel will strengthen partnership with key players such as non-governmental organisations in developing policy on environmental and energy education.

Business Links

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what costs have been saved by closures and amalgamations of business links since 1 May; and what are the total projected costs of these closures and amalgamations. [13519]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* There has been no programme of closures or amalgamations of Business Links since 1 May, although individual Business Links may have done so on an independent basis.

Business Links are tasked with preparing business plans from which I would expect efficiency savings to be made.

Plutonium

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations Her Majesty's Government made to the United States Government over the use of plutonium fuel on the recently launched NASA spaceship and the concern for environmental safety. [13663]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The recent launch by NASA was the start of the Cassini/Huygens mission to Saturn. The UK has contributed to ESA's Huygens probe which will land and make measurements on one of Saturn's moons. It is a fundamental priority for the UK that space activities are undertaken in a safe and responsible way. Neither NASA nor ESA underestimate the care required in handling plutonium and have gone to great lengths to ensure the safety of the power sources. I understand these safety measures include: the form of the plutonium—a type of ceramic, the way it is stored—divided into 18 independent units, and the multiple layers of materials preventing accidental release. Her Majesty's Government was satisfied the risk of environmental impact was reduced to an absolute minimum and sufficiently balanced by the valuable scientific data that will be gathered by the mission about the evolution of planets in the solar system and ultimately the Earth itself.

International Energy Systems Ltd.

Mr. Fallon: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what offers were received by BNFL Ltd. from companies interested in taking over or sharing in the work of International Energy Systems Ltd. [14069]

Mr. Battle: Commercial and operational matters affecting BNFL and its subsidiaries are of course a matter for the Company. However, I understand BNFL will be making contact with the hon. Member.

HEALTH

Fluoridation

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on fluoridation of drinking water indicating those local authority areas in which fluoride is currently added to water. [14392]

Ms Jowell: Some 5.5 million people in the United Kingdom receive water where the fluoride content has been artificially increased to a level of one part of fluoride per million of water. Local authority areas do not necessarily receive a discrete water supply, but the health authorities in England whose populations are wholly or partly served by fluoridation schemes are Bassetlaw, North Bedfordshire, Bromsgrove and Redditch, Birmingham Central, Birmingham East, Birmingham North, Birmingham South, Birmingham West, Coventry, Crewe, Dudley, Durham, North West Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, North Lincolnshire, South Lincolnshire, Newcastle, Northumberland, Sandwell, Scunthorpe, Solihull, Mid Staffordshire, South East Staffordshire, North Tyneside, North Warwickshire, South Warwickshire, Walsall, Worcester and Wolverhampton.

The Government are looking at options for the fluoridation programme and will make an announcement in due course.

In Vitro Fertilisation

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which health authorities in England provide in vitro fertilisation; and what measures are being taken to tackle inequality of provision between health authorities. [14391]

Ms Jowell: Information on health authority funding of in vitro fertilisation is contained in the Report of the Fourth National Survey of National Health Service Funding of Infertility Services, produced by the College of Health on behalf of the National Infertility Awareness Campaign (published November 1996). Copies are available in the Library.

The Government are committed to tackling the issue of unexplained or unjustified variations in the service provided in different parts of the country. The forthcoming White Paper on replacing the National Health Service internal market and the commissioning process will be founded upon a number of key principles, one of which is fairness. The White Paper will propose a revised framework for monitoring performance which will include equity of access in relation to need.

Medical Procedures (Success Rate)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what new proposals he has to increase the percentage of NHS operations and other procedures which are successful. [14417]

Ms Jowell: The quality, effectiveness and outcomes of National Health Service services will be a paramount objective of the plans we will bring forward to replace the competitive, contract driven and bureaucratic internal market.

We have already made a clear commitment to put clinical quality at the heart of our plans for the NHS. The Priorities and Planning Guidance for the NHS for 1998–99 made clear that the effectiveness and quality of services is central to the purpose of the NHS. We have in development an integrated approach to improving the quality, effectiveness and outcomes of NHS care.

The law bringing into force the General Medical Council's professional performance procedures was implemented on 1 July 1997 and we will shortly be issuing guidance to the NHS on its role in these procedures.

The Chief Medical Officer has written to all Chief Executives and Medical Directors of NHS trusts asking them to ensure that they have effective procedures in place for doctors to report their concerns about the conduct, performance or health of medical colleagues. This builds on the General Medical Council's guidance in *Duties of a Doctor* which requires all doctors to:

> "act quickly to prevent patients from risk if you have good reason to believe you or a colleague may not be fit for practice".

We also welcome the new Safety and Efficacy Register of New Interventional Procedures, which is meant to help the clinical professions decide how to handle the safe introduction of developments in technology in surgery. Furthermore, the recently introduced reforms of higher specialist medical training, which includes the introduction of improved, more structured medical training programmes, will ultimately lead to improvements in the quality of the care provided to patients.

National Health Service Directorships

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health to what extent it is his policy that there should be a presumption that appointments of non-executive directors to NHS directorships should be made from candidates living within the trust's area; in what circumstances candidates from outside the area may be *(a)* shortlisted and *(b)* appointed; and if he will make a statement. [14733]

Mr. Milburn: Under the Government's new procedures candidates are expected to live in the area served by the trust involved. This will apply to all current postholders seeking reappointment as well as new candidates. Only in exceptional circumstances would we be prepared to depart from this stipulation. For example,

where there are severe local recruitment problems; when a particularly strong candidate has demonstrated in some other way their commitment to the local community; or where there is someone living only just outside the core area served by the trust whom it might be sensible to appoint.

Nutrition (Schools)

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the report by Professor James into food issues and schools which was prepared for his Department. [14770]

Ms Jowell: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and I are meeting Professor James later this month to discuss his draft report on healthy active schools. A decision on how best to publicise his recommendations will be taken after discussion with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education.

Children's Rights

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will establish an office of Children's Rights Commissioner. [14942]

Mr. Boateng: The Government have no plans to establish an office of Children's Rights Commissioner. During 1998 the Government will be preparing the Second United Kingdom Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in accordance with the requirements of Article 44 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. We will take into account possible advantages of such an Office and seek to assess progress in other countries where such an Office has been established.

Winter Mortality Rates

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what have been the excess winter mortality rates in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* Cornwall, *(c)* Tyneside and *(d)* Suffolk for each of the last 10 years in terms of (i) excess numbers and (ii) percentages for (1) those aged 65 to 80 years, (2) those aged over 80 years, (3) single parent families, (4) people in receipt of income support, (5) people with disabilities and (6) others. [14259]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from John Fox to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 7 November 1997:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to answer your recent question on excess winter deaths in Lancashire, Cornwall, Tyneside and Suffolk for each of the last 10 years. In his absence, I am replying as the Director of the Census, Population and Health Group.

The estimated numbers of excess deaths in each county during the last ten winters, based on the latest available data, are presented in the following table. The percentage of excess winter deaths among those aged 65 to 80 years and among those aged over 80 years are also given.

	Number of excess winter deaths[1]	*Percentage of excess winter deaths*	
	All ages	*65–80 years*	*Over 80 years*
Lancashire			
1987–88	1,110	49	41
1988–89	720	42	55
1989–90	1,710	43	47
1990–91	1,100	44	53
1991–92	1,050	40	53
1992–93	960	29	56
1993–94	820	26	57
1994–95	810	44	50
1995–96	1,210	38	52
1996–97	1,520	27	60
Cornwall			
1987–88	340	46	52
1988–89	160	54	43
1989–90	490	41	54
1990–91	500	39	48
1991–92	450	49	44
1992–93	210	37	49
1993–94	310	17	67
1994–95	320	22	59
1995–96	420	28	67
1996–97	650	25	65
Tyne and Wear			
1987–88	840	42	48
1988–89	500	37	52
1989–90	1,020	48	42
1990–91	780	43	40
1991–92	970	44	46
1992–93	440	43	46
1993–94	680	45	42
1994–95	580	39	47
1995–96	820	43	48
1996–97	990	44	51
Suffolk			
1987–88	370	34	58
1988–89	450	47	49
1989–90	550	29	57
1990–91	590	44	48
1991–92	400	36	62
1992–93	350	32	66
1993–94	320	42	57
1994–95	490	36	54
1995–96	560	28	67
1996–97	760	31	64

[1] Rounded to the nearest 10.

Excess winter deaths are defined as the number of deaths in the four months from December to March less the average of the numbers during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July). The table gives the percentage of the excess attributable to each of the given age groups.

The mortality data collected by the ONS do not include information on whether the deceased was a single parent, in receipt of income support or disabled. It is therefore not possible to calculate the percentage of excess winter deaths among these groups.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment Service (Annual Report)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the Employment Service annual report and accounts for 1996–97 will be laid before Parliament. [15308]

Mr. Blunkett: I have today laid before the House the Employment Service's Annual Report and Accounts for 1996–97 which give full details of performance in that operational year.

The Report notes that the Employment Service achieved some very significant successes in 1996–97. Most notably, the Service rose to the major challenges of successfully introducing the Jobseeker's Allowance and implementing the Labour Market System in the same operational year. Both were very large undertakings which required effective management and considerable investment in infrastructure, training and systems. The intensive effort which the ES had to devote to these two initiatives did result, however, in the Service not meeting a number of its job placing and other targets.

The Report notes that there has in addition been some misrecording of job placings and that performance for 1996–97 has been over-stated as a result. The causes lie in inconsistent application of ES job broking instructions and weaknesses in the performance validation process which are being tackled as a matter of priority. The ES Chief Executive has provided me with details of the urgent steps he has taken in this respect including issuing fresh and comprehensive instructions on the definitions of a submission and a placing, and the introduction of a new and more thorough performance validation system. Alleged cases of deliberate misrecording of placings are being investigated and appropriate disciplinary action will be considered against anyone found deliberately to have contravened the procedures.

The Comptroller and Auditor General in his comments on the Report notes that the Employment Service has taken swift and robust action to address this issue. The NAO and the Service have agreed that the NAO will undertake an annual validation of the Agency's performance measures and performance achieved, beginning in this current operational year. Further details of the action taken by the Employment Service are contained within the report.

It is important to note that the misrecording of placings has no effect on the unemployment count which is taken from the records of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance as shown by the Benefits Agency computer system.

The current review of the Employment Service targets which I announced to the House on 30 July will take these matters into account. I expect the Review to recommend by the end of the year a series of targets which reflect our new priorities, are fully achievable and which can be measured accurately.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 10 November 1997

PRIME MINISTER

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister what progress was made at the Commonwealth Conference on Yemen's application to join the Commonwealth; and when he estimates that Yemen will join the Commonwealth. [14985]

The Prime Minister: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement that I made to the House on 28 October, *Official Report,* column 714.

Former Prime Ministers (Private Offices)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish the annual cost to public funds of maintaining the private offices of former Prime Ministers. [14986]

The Prime Minister: All former Prime Ministers are eligible to receive an allowance to assist them with the continuing heavy burden of office and secretarial costs arising from their special position in public life. The allowance is similar in purpose and amount to the parliamentary office costs allowance, but is paid in respect of public not parliamentary duties.

The maximum amount of the allowance available to former Prime Ministers during the current financial year is £47,568 plus £4,757 for contributions to pension schemes of members of staff whose salaries are paid from the allowance.

I do not think it right to disclose the amounts of this allowance claimed by individual former Prime Ministers, any more than the House discloses details of claims by Members under the office costs allowance.

European Council

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Ministers if he will ensure that Ministers make available to Parliament details of United Kingdom proposals for European Council meeting discussion in advance of council meetings held under the British presidency. [14710]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and hon. Friends will keep the House properly informed of their activities during the UK's presidency. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will shortly be giving evidence before the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs on the UK's priorities and objectives for the presidency.

Focus Groups

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister what use he makes of information from focus groups. [14835]

The Prime Minister: The Government, like their predecessor, monitor public opinion in a number of ways.

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the organisations or persons who supply him with information collated from focus groups. [14836]

The Prime Minister: The Government monitor public opinion in a number of ways, using a number of different organisations.

Correspondence

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Prime Minister when he will reply to the letters dated 12 June, 12 August and 20 October from Mr. Nicholas Bennett concerning a Labour member of Reading Borough Council and Berkshire County Council; and if he will publish his reply in the *Official Report.* [14749]

The Prime Minister: My office have replied.

TREASURY

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had or plans to have with his EU counterparts on the problems facing computer systems through the century date change; and if he will make a statement. [13153]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor has had no contacts with his EU colleagues directly about the problems facing computer systems thanks to the century date change.

Government Expenditure

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate in cash terms in 1995–96 prices the reduction in central Government expenditure for 1997–98 and 1998–99 between the assumptions made in *(a)* the November 1996 Budget, *(b)* the July 1997 Budget and *(c)* the most recent assumption. [13190]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The provision made in the last two Budgets for Central Government within the Control Total programmes in 1997–98 and 1998–99 in cash and in 1995–96 prices are set out below:

£ billions

	1996 FSBR		*1997 FSBR*	
	Cash terms	*1995–96 prices*	*Cash terms*	*1995–96 prices*
1997–98	187.2	179.0	187.4	177.5
1998–99	191.4	179.5	192.6	177.5

The Government have not revised their economic assumptions since the July 1997 Budget.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of general Government expenditure in cash terms for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99, using (i) current estimates, (ii) the estimates at the time of the July 1997 Budget and (ii) the estimates at the time of the November 1996 Budget. [13644]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The Government's estimates in cash terms of general government expenditure for 1997–98 and 1998–99 are set out in the table below:

Budget

£ billion

	1997–98	*1998–99*
July 1997	319	331
November 1996	319	327

The July 1997 figures are the current estimates for general government expenditure.

Income Tax

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what is his estimate for the number of people who would cease to pay income tax if the personal income tax allowance were raised to £10,000 per annum; [13247]

(2) what is his estimate of the cost of raising the personal income tax allowance to £10,000 per annum. [13248]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The estimated cost at 1997–98 income levels of increasing both the non-aged personal allowance and the aged personal allowance to £10,000 is £29 billion. This would take 9.8 million taxpayers out of income tax.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the policy of the Government to adhere to the existing control total for public expenditure for 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [13287]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The Government are firmly committed to the Control Total for 1998–99.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Visas (Correspondence)

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what, at 1 October, was the average time it took for the migration and visas correspondence unit to deal with an hon. Member's inquiry; and how many outstanding cases there were on 1 October. [14222]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to the replies that I gave to him on 4 November, *Official Report,* columns *166-67,* and to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, North (Mr. Rooney) on 3 November, *Official Report,* column *11.*

Iraq

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of the United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement of 29 October on Iraq. [14711]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A copy of the United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement on 29 October on Iraq has been placed in the libraries of the House.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library copies of the five most recent reports to the United Nations Security Council of the UNISCOM inspection and verification mission in Iraq. [14713]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A copy of the five most recent reports submitted by the Executive Chairman of the UN Special Commission to the UN has been placed in the libraries of the House.

Bananas

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans the Government have to encourage *(a)* the World Trade Organisation members and *(b)* EU members states to accommodate the interests of the ACP banana producers and facilitate the diversification of their economies; over what time scale; and if he will make a statement. [14997]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We are working actively on the implication of the WTO findings on the EC banana regime. We are in close touch with the Commission in Brussels, which has responsibility for devising a WTO compatible response on behalf of the Community. They will be discussing the implications with our traditional banana suppliers and other interested parties such as the US. At the CHOGM in Edinburgh last month, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made clear to Caribbean leaders that the UK will play a major role in devising new banana import arrangements. We want to ensure Commonwealth and other ACP banana producers have continuing access to the EU banana market. New arrangements are likely to come into effect in early 1999.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what transitional arrangements the Government plan to make to reduce the impact of the recent World Trade Organisation ruling on Commonwealth banana producers; and if he will make a statement. [14996]

Mr. Doug Henderson: In the Edinburgh Economic Declaration agreed at CHOGM last month, Heads of Government resolved to encourage the EU and WTO members to accommodate the legitimate interests of the ACP banana producers and facilitate the diversification of their economies. The UK has for a number of years been promoting good commercial practice and competitiveness among those Commonwealth banana producers likely to be most affected by the WTO ruling, principally the Windward Islands. The UK-funded Cargill report outlined the steps necessary to restructure and modernise their banana industries and was agreed with the Windwards Governments in 1995. Caribbean Governments also receive large allocations of EC aid to improve competitiveness, assist economic diversification and develop social safety nets.

We are also liaising with the Commission in Brussels, which has the principal responsibility for the Community's response to the WTO ruling. As leading advocates of Caribbean interests we want to ensure the

new regime is both WTO compatible and meets our obligations to our traditional banana suppliers in the Caribbean.

EU Presidency

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the statements he has made outside Parliament on the proposed priorities for the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union since 1 May; and if he will place copies of each in the Library. [14719]

Mr. Doug Henderson: On 3 November, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Institute for European Affairs in Dublin about the Government's priorities for the UK's forthcoming Presidency of the European Union. A copy has been placed in the libraries of the House. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary looks forward to giving evidence on this same subject to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs on 1 December—in advance of which he will be submitting a Memorandum—and to the House's debate on European Affairs later that month which may also choose to cover the subject.

Kenya

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 29 October, *Official Report*, column *824*, on human rights in Kenya, what action he plans to take to follow up his meeting with the Kenyan Foreign Minister. [15021]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We shall maintain a vigorous dialogue with the Kenyan Government on human rights issues through our High Commissioner in Nairobi and at Ministerial level when the occasion arises.

Chechnya

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the actions taken by his Department to obtain the release of Camilla Carr and Jon James, presently held by kidnappers in Chechnya. [14800]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Since 3 July, when Jon James and Camilla Carr were kidnapped, their employers and we have sought to establish the facts and are working hard for their release. As their families know, the Prime Minister spoke to President Yeltsin about the couple last month. We are also in touch with the Chechen authorities, but the ability of the Russian or, indeed, any government to help in this troubled region is limited. There has been a spate of kidnappings in and around Chechnya in recent months, which may be criminally inspired: one reason why our strong consular advice is that British citizens should not travel to Chechnya.

Algeria

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department will take steps to persuade the Government of Algeria to allow an investigation of events in their country by the United Nations rapporteur on extrajudicial summary and arbitrary executions. [14765]

Mr. Fatchett: While a solution to the serious problems in Algeria must come from the Algerians themselves, we condemn unreservedly the violence which has prevailed there. In our regular contact with the Algeria authorities, we encourage Algeria's democratisation process. As part of our discussions, we have encouraged them to accept the proposed visit by the United Nations Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Summary and Arbitrary Executions and will continue to do so.

European Courts

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what challenges the United Kingdom Government have made to other member states' nominations to judicial positions within *(a)* the European Court of Justice and *(b)* the European Court of Human Rights in the last five years. [15023]

Mr. Doug Henderson: *(a)* None. Judicial appointments to the European Court of Justice are made by common accord of the governments of the Member States.

(b) Judges are elected to the European Court of Human Rights by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. We have not previously challenged judicial nominations, nor is there any formal procedure for doing so. An informal procedure has now been agreed, at our suggestion, for the examination of prospective candidatures for the new Protocol ll Court of Human Rights.

Bosnia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what actions the Government propose to take to effect the arrest of war criminals in Bosnia before the withdrawal of IFOR. [14768]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We demand that the responsible authorities surrender indictees to The Hague. We are not prepared to speculate on possible alternative action.

GCHQ

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to announce a decision on the possible relocation of GCHQ facilities; and if he will make a statement. [14905]

Mr. Robin Cook: The invitation to tender for GCHQ's accommodation Private Finance Initiative (PFI) project has been issued to four private sector consortia. The tender responses are expected in Spring 1998 and will be subject to a process of detailed evaluation and post-tender negotiations. The complexities of this process make it difficult to predict when an announcement will be made relating to the possible relocation of GCHQ facilities, but it is not expected that it will be before summer 1998.

International Criminal Court

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the proceedings at the Preparatory Committee for the International Criminal Court held in August indicating the issues remaining to be decided at the Plenary Conference in 1998. [14769]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The August 1997 session of the Preparatory Committee considered mechanisms for triggering action by the Court, the Court's procedures, and the relationship between the Court and national criminal justice systems. Progress was made towards producing an agreed text on all these issues and in particular on the last. Further discussion will be possible at the two remaining sessions of the Preparatory Committee, but many matters will be left for decision at the Diplomatic Conference next year.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the concept of burden sharing in relation to refugees and asylum seekers as introduced by the Amsterdam treaty. [14746]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Under Article 73k(2)(b) of the Treaty establishing the European Community as introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam, the Council is to adopt measures promoting a balance of effort between Member States in receiving and bearing the consequences of receiving refugees and displaced persons. Decisions will be by unanimity. These measures will not be binding on the UK unless it opts in to them.

EU Legislation (Gibraltar)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list all EU legislation agreed within the last 15 years as a result of Her Majesty's Government agreeing to Spanish requests to exclude Gibraltar. [14676]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This information is not readily available. But the main legislative items falling within the category to which my hon. Friend refers are five EC Measures relating to the Single Market in aviation, which have been agreed by the EU since 1987 subject to the suspension of their application to Gibraltar airport.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list all current EU proposals that are blocked because of Spanish insistence that Gibraltar be excluded. [14671]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The main recent items on which no agreement has been reached are the draft External Frontiers Convention, the draft Winding-Up Directive and the draft Airport Statistics Regulation.

EU (Police and Judiciary)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what provisions of the Amsterdam treaty apply to the operations of police and judicial authorities from one member state in the territory of another; and if he will make a statement. [14743]

Mr. Doug Henderson: New Article K.4 of the Treaty on European Union, as introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam, provides that the Council shall lay down the conditions and limitations under which the competent authorities referred to in Articles K.2 and K.3 may operate in the territory of another Member State in liaison and in agreement with the authorities of that state. By virtue of Article K.6, the Council must act by unanimity.

EU Territory

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the territorial definition of the European Union. [14750]

Mr. Doug Henderson: As the European Union is not a State it has, itself, no territory, as distinct from the Member States.

EU Commissioners

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the President of the European Commission is required, under the Amsterdam treaty, to give reasons for rejecting the nomination for Commissioner of any member state; and if he will make a statement. [14745]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There is no such requirement under the Treaty of Amsterdam. Article 158(2) of the Treaty establishing the European Community as amended by the Treaty of Amsterdam provides for future members of the European Commission to be nominated by the Governments of the member states "by common accord" with the nominee for President. This will inevitably entail dialogue between the nominee for President and the Governments of the member states.

Amsterdam Treaty (Visas)

Mr. Streeter: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if decisions on the issuing procedures in respect of short-term visas will be made by co-decision under the treaty of Amsterdam; and if he will make a statement; [14744]

(2) if proposals to tighten the procedures for issuing visas would be subject to a veto in the European Parliament under the Amsterdam treaty. [14747]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Under new Articles 73j(2)(b)(ii) and 730 of the treaty establishing the European Community as introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam, for a period of five years after the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam the Council is to adopt measures, by unanimity, having consulted the European Parliament on the crossing of external borders. This will include procedures and conditions for issuing visas by Member States for intended stays of no more than three months. After a period of five years after the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam, such measures are to be adopted by the council in accordance with the codecision procedure. Such measures will not be binding on the UK unless it opts in to them.

BBC World

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what were the total receipts, and for how many programmes or hours of television broadcasting, that the BBC World Service received from BBC World in each year since BBC World's inception. [14740]

Mr. Fatchett: The following sums were paid by BBC Worldwide (the BBC's commercial arm) to the World Service to fund the cost of provision of news output for BBC World:

Financial year	*Payment (£)*	*World Service Output (hours per day)*
1991–92	6,089,979	12
1992–93	7,133,000	12
1993–94	9,130,000	12
1994–95	15,646,715	[1]15
1995–96	[2]10,704,074	15
1996–97	10,650,000	15

[1] Average.
[2] The annual payment was reduced from 1995–96 onwards when BBC Worldwide took on the provision of the technical resource requirements (studios etc) for BBC World news directly: previously the cost of these had been reflected in the sums paid to the World Service.

WALES

Bathing Beaches

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many beaches in Wales currently have been designated Blue Flag beaches; and if he will make a statement. [14091]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Nine Welsh beaches are currently in receipt of the prestigious Blue Flag awards. This is more than twice as many as Wales has received before. As part of the Green Sea Initiative there is a target of achieving 50 Blue Flags in Wales by the year 2000.

Health Care Providers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list, by health care provider, for each of the last four years, the number of contracts each health authority had in place, indicating how many of these had been referred for arbitration within the NHS region; and how many were left unsigned by *(a)* the provider and *(b)* the purchaser at the end of the year to which they applied, and, for 1997–98, by the end of October 1997. [14610]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Information on the number of contracts between health authorities and trusts or on their status is not held centrally.

During the period 1 April 1993 to 30 March 1997 only one contract between a Welsh Health Authority and NHS trust went to arbitration. None are expected to go to arbitration in 1997–98.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Charles Haughey

Mr. Robert McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps her Department is taking to investigate the propriety of the payment made by Dunnes Stores, Bangor, through the late John Furze, to the former Taoiseach Charles Haughey; and if she will provide evidence to the tribunal of inquiry investigating such payments. [13022]

Mr. Ingram: The circumstances surrounding various payments allegedly made to Mr. Charles Haughey are at the centre of investigations being conducted by a Tribunal of Inquiry in the Republic of Ireland. No similar or other investigations have been instituted in Northern Ireland, neither has there been received any request for assistance to that Tribunal of Inquiry.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency in Northern Ireland. [14074]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No steps have been taken to establish an Environmental Protection Agency in Northern Ireland.

The Environmental and Heritage Service, a Next Steps Agency within the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland was set up on 1 April 1996 to assume operational responsibility for environmental issues.

Electricity Prices

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the progress of discussions about the level of electricity prices in Northern Ireland. [14283]

Mr. Ingram: Electricity prices are coming down. Northern Ireland Electricity reduced tariffs form 1 April 1997 by an average 8 per cent. for domestic and up to 3 per cent. for industrial and commercial customers. The MMC review of NIE's price controls will have retrospective effect from 1 April 1997 and will lead to further tariff reductions of at least 6 per cent. for domestic and 2 per cent. for industrial and commercial customers. The precise details of the revised price controls are currently the subject of legal action. In addition, the Director General of Electricity Supply has secured voluntary agreements on lower generation costs at both Coolkeeragh and Belfast West power stations. He has announced his intention to refer the Ballylumford and Kilroot contracts to the MMC and, in the absence of voluntary agreement on these contracts, is likely to do so very shortly.

The Government are discussing with the Director General and NIE how best to use the £45 million balance of the £60 million support package for the future benefit of all electricity consumers.

Stormont

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to *(a)* remove and *(b)* relocate (i) statues and (ii) memorials in Parliament Buildings, Stormont. [14052]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Some items were removed from Parliament Buildings during refurbishment to a secure store for their protection. Consideration will be given to the appropriate relocation of these items in due course.

Telecommunication Masts

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will commission research into potential harmful effects of microwave radiation emitted from telecommunication masts. [14053]

Mr. Worthington: No. The National Radiological Protection Board advises Government on the risks to health of exposure to electromagnetic fields. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 3 November, *Official Report*, column 7, which details research in this area.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders her Department made during the summer adjournment. [14386]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 5 November, *Official Report*, column *216*, by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Cattle

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the numbers of cows *(a)* exported from Northern Ireland *(b)* slaughtered in Northern Ireland and sold for human consumption and *(c)* slaughtered and incinerated in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years and in the current year to date. [14051]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information requested is as follows:

A. Export[1] of cows from Northern Ireland

	Number
1992	456
1993	68
1994	112
1995	222
1996	[2]5,261
1997 (to date)	[2]5,295

[1] Includes exports to GB
[2] Animals exported to GB for cull under the Over Thirty Months Scheme.

B. Cows slaughtered in Northern Ireland and sold for human consumption

	Number
1992	64,116
1993	60,686
1994	66,206
1995	69,523
1996	16,774
1997 (to date)	[1]193

[1] From 29 March no animals over 30 months of age were slaughtered and used for human consumption on /SEAC advice. The 1997 figure represents animals which calved and were later slaughtered before reaching 30 months of age.

C. Cows slaughtered and incinerated[1] in Northern Ireland

	Number
1992	392
1993	587
1994	456
1995	222
1996	127
1997 (to date)	42

[1] Totals include heifers.

For sake of completeness, the number of cows slaughtered and their carcasses rendered (but not yet incinerated) under the Over-Thirty-Months' Scheme:

	Number
1996	86,381
1997 (to date)	66,827

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of Stare for Northern Ireland if she will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts her Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14948]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* The Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments have had no contract with Monitor Consultancy.

Beef Cattle

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has for the introduction of a beef cattle subsidy to be paid at slaughter. [14772]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* A beef deseasonalisation premium will be paid in Northern Ireland in 1998, as in 1997, on eligible steer cattle which are slaughtered between 1 January and 10 June 1998.

Mr. Andy Wood

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions she had with the Minister without Portfolio *(a)* in respect of her Office's information officer Mr. Andy Wood before he was replaced at his post and *(b)* in respect of identifying his replacement; and if she will make a statement. [14524]

Marjorie Mowlam: Before asking for Mr. Wood to be removed from the post of Director of the Northern Ireland Information Service I did not discuss his removal with my right hon. Friend the Minister without Portfolio. After Mr. Wood's removal, my right hon. Friend was one of a number of colleagues that I consulted about Mr. Wood's replacement.

On foot of those consultations I put in hand a review of the structures and working practices of the Northern Ireland Information Service. I have just received the report of that review, one consequence of which is that the Northern Ireland Office will shortly be advertising an open competition of the post of Director of the Northern Ireland Information Service.

SCOTLAND

Student Awards Agency

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will set up an inquiry into the administration of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. [14292]

Mr. Wilson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland to provide a full report on the difficulties encountered by the Agency in processing student award applications timeously this year so that we can determine what measures need to be implemented to prevent a recurrence.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what factors underlie the delays in the payment of grants by the Student Awards Agency for the current academic year; and what steps he is taking to address the problem. [14291]

Mr. Wilson: A number of factors have combined to affect adversely the ability of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland to process awards within its normal timescale in the current academic year. Most of these flow from the introduction of a new awards processing system in April of this year. There were a larger number of initial problems encountered than had been anticipated and these, together with delays in converting data from the previous system, unfamiliarity with the new system, and the need to enter large volumes of 'standing' data in its first year of operation, resulted in a backlog of applications building up. The profile of receipt of applications is heavily concentrated into the months from May to September and it is extremely difficult for the Agency to recover from a backlog once one has developed. The new awards system has, however, performed well after the initial problems were overcome. It has proved resilient under intensive use and significant improvements in efficiency are expected to be realised in future years.

Scottish higher and further education institutions were provided with an advance of their block grant in recognition of the fact that their income from tuition fees in October would be less than they had reason to expect. This was also designed to enable institutions to offer short term assistance to those students in financial difficulties because of delays in receiving their grant cheques, and was in addition to the Access Funds which are normally used for this purpose. Meanwhile, the Agency was set a demanding target to clear the vast majority of the backlog by the end of October, which has largely been achieved. It is expected to be up to date with processing applications by the end of November.

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many applications for grants by students from Scotland to study at Scottish universities and colleges for the Session 1997–98 were received by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland *(a)* before the normal closing date and *(b)* after it; how many were processed and paid (i) by the beginning of the student term, (ii) by four weeks after the beginning of the term and (iii) at the latest count; and how many remain unpaid. [14293]

Mr. Wilson: The closing date for the receipt of undergraduate applications by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland in academic year 1997–98 is 31 January 1998 and it is not therefore a factor in the present situation. Students continuing a period of full-time education were, however, advised to apply by 15 May 1997 in order to ensure that any grant payable would be available at the start of the first term. New students are encouraged to apply as soon as they receive an unconditional offer of a place on a course.

Of the 71,436 applications received from continuing students up to 3 November 1997, 20,656 were received by 15 May. At the same date 40,434 applications had been received from new students. Applications are not attributed to a specific course at the point of receipt and term dates vary between institutions. The best estimate is that about 27,750 applications had been received four or more weeks before the start of the term, which is the normal period allowed for processing fully completed applications.

As at 3 November, 42,884 awards had been processed in sufficient time to allow any payment to be made at the beginning of the students' terms and a further 22,721 had been processed in time to allow any payment to be made by 4 weeks after the beginning of the term. A total of 90,217 applications had been processed and 28,927 had yet to be processed; many of the latter are likely to be "fees only" cases with no payment due to the student.

These figures cover all Scottish domiciled students eligible for support under the Students' Allowances Scheme and the Student Nursing and Midwifery Bursary Scheme rather than only those attending Scottish institutions. Detailed figures split by institutional location are not readily available.

EU Students (Tuition Fees)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what arrangements he proposes to put in place to discover the incomes of the parents of EU students at Scottish universities so that they can be assessed for the students' contribution to their tuition fees. [14294]

Mr. Wilson: The student award application forms already have facilities for the collection of information on parental, spouse and student income, as required, and these will in future be used to collect the necessary information from EU students.

We are currently considering the nature of the documentation which will be required to support the information provided, and the most appropriate means of dealing with currency differences, to enable EU students' contributions to tuition costs to be assessed on the same basis as those of Scottish domiciled students. Detailed guidance on how this will work in practice will be available early in 1998.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Animal Welfare

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria he plans to use in determining whether to suspend or revoke an authorisation issued under the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997; and if he will make a statement. [13914]

Mr. Morley: A transporter can be removed from operating under a General Authorisation or a Specific Authorisation can be revoked or suspended in the event of repeated infringements against the Order or any one infringement which involves serious suffering to animals. These sanctions apply whether or not the infringement leads to a criminal conviction.

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in how many cases he is currently considering suspension or revocation of an authorisation issued under the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997; and if he will make a statement. [13915]

Mr. Morley: The Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997 came into force on 1 July this year, with the Specific Authorisation Scheme operational from 1 October. We have not yet had cause to revoke or suspend any authorisations, but we have made it clear we will not hesitate to use these powers wherever appropriate.

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has to alter the minimum values system under which horses, donkeys and ponies are prevented from being sent for slaughter abroad; and if he will make a statement. [13916]

Mr. Morley: I have no plans to alter the legislation which requires a minimum valuation to be provided for specified categories of equines before a welfare export licence is issued.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to ensure that exported animals receive *(a)* a mid-journey break and *(b)* a 24-hour break once they have left the UK when such breaks are required by directive 95/29/EC; and if he will make a statement. [13920]

Mr. Morley: Enforcement of the rest period requirements of EU Directive 95/29 is the responsibility of the authorities of the member state in which a rest is required to take place. For their part, the Government ensure that exporters plan journeys in accordance with the EU rules, making such arrangements for rest periods as are required. We will not hesitate to use the sanctions provided by the Directive against transporters who are shown to have made false declarations about the journeys they have undertaken.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are the costs to his Department of monitoring and enforcing the terms of the common agricultural policy. [14429]

Mr. Rooker: Separate figures for the costs of monitoring and enforcing the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) are not available. Such costs form part of the overall administration costs of seeking to implement CAP obligations efficiently. These costs are set out in the Departmental Report 1997 (CM3604) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Intervention Board.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Human Rights

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the President of the Council what her timetable will be for establishing a Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights. [14759]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Government intend to take into account what is said during the passage of the Human Rights Bill before deciding what form of parliamentary committee and terms of reference to recommend.

Mail Services

Mr. Burns: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what was the amount of money paid to the management consultants for their study and advice on trying to improve the flow of mail *(a)* internally and *(b)* through the Royal Mail to hon. Members. [15075]

Mrs. Roe: The consultancy was let following a competitive tender. The cost is commercially confidential.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what problems have been identified in the delivery of internal and external mail to, and within, the Palace of Westminster since the recent changes; and if she will make a statement on measures that will be taken to improve the system. [15074]

Mrs. Roe: At its meeting on 4 November the Administration Committee raised with the Serjeant at Arms certain problems with the new postal arrangements that had been brought to its attention by hon. Members. It was agreed that there had been some initial difficulties, but my Committee does support the new initiative, and considers that once the identified problems are remedied a more efficient service should result. It was reported to the Committee that there had been some industrial action by Royal Mail staff in Essex, and this may well have affected deliveries adversely in my hon. Friend's and other hon. Members' constituencies in this region.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what was the total cost of implementing the recent changes to the internal and external mail systems in the Palace of Westminster. [15076]

Mrs. Roe: The total works and equipment costs to date borne by the House Authorities are £45,096 excluding VAT. Costs borne by Royal Mail are not available.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what plans the Committee has to seek an assessment of the changes to the mail system made by the Department of the Serjeant at Arms; and if she will make a statement. [15077]

Mrs. Roe: A review of the changes will be carried out once the new system has been successfully settled in, and the result will be reported to the Committee for its consideration.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Hawk Aircraft (Indonesia)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will state the value of the export credits extended as part of the 1996 deal to supply Hawk aircraft to Indonesia, *(a)* in absolute terms and *(b)* as a percentage of the value of the arms deal with Indonesia. [12584]

Mrs. Beckett: The ECGD loan in support of the supply of Hawk aircraft amounted to £280 million. ECGD's support for this transaction amounted to 87 per cent. of the total support it provided for defence business with Indonesia in 1995–96.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders her Department made during the summer adjournment. [14388]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) on 3 November, *Official Report*, columns *43–44*, and also to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 5 November, *Official Report* column *216*.

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the average time taken by her Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13960]

Mrs. Beckett *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* My Department has a target of answering 90 per cent. of correspondence from hon. Members within 10 working days. In addition I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 3 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *5*. Figures for handling DTI correspondence will be published in due course.

India

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade which representatives of British industry are to accompany her on her forthcoming tour of India. [14691]

Mrs. Beckett: I will be accompanied by a delegation drawn from the consultancy, infrastructure, power, oil and gas, Scotch Whisky, financial, insurance and education and training sectors.

Cabinet 2000

Mr. Cohen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what response she has made to the proposal of the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux for a public-private partnership to support its Cabinet 2000 project; and if she will make a statement. [14475]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: NACAB has put proposals to the DTI for additional funding as part of the grant-in-aid we provide each year to finance part of the Cabinet 2000 project. It is itself seeking separate funding from the corporate sector, from its member bureaux and from other potential sponsors such as the National Lotteries Charities Board. The bid for additional funds from my Department is being considered as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

Holocaust (Confiscated Funds)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when she expects the work identifying confiscated funds deposited by victims of the holocaust to be completed; and if she will make a statement. [14485]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: I have announced, 31 July, *Official Report*, column *641*, that the Government have set in train a research project to examine papers relevant to the Trading with the Enemy legislation under which the property of residents of enemy countries was confiscated during the Second World War. The project, which has been co-ordinated by the FCO in close partnership with the DTI is making good progress, but is not yet complete. As previously announced, a report of the findings will be published as soon as possible.

River Wear (Quays)

Mr. Etherington: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many deep water quays on the River Wear are currently leased to *(a)* NESL/British Shipbuilders and *(b)* Tyne and Wear Development corporation; what is the present state of repair of each quay; what is the remaining term of each lease; and if she will make a statement. [14682]

Mr. Battle: This Department does not lease any land or quays to either British Shipbuilders or the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is the policy of her Department on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if she will make a statement. [13264]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The Department has sought external advice on tax matters in order properly to carry out its role (e.g. in relation to privatisation) but not for tax avoidance purposes.

Lookalike Products

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the President of the Board of Trade when the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs will meet the British Brands Group to discuss lookalike products. [14618]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The British Brands Group has made its views clear to me in writing on the question of lookalike products. I have no plans to meet representatives of the group at this time.

Cable Television (West Midlands)

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list those towns in the west midlands region which have undergone street trenching by cable television companies. [14727]

Mrs. Roche: The information is not available in the form requested. However the figures below show the number of homes passed by cable companies operating in the west midlands.

Construction of cable networks in the west midlands area (Latest available figures)

Franchise	*Homes in franchise area*	*Homes passed to date*	*Percentage of homes passed*
Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley, Sandwell, Cannock	508,900	325,406	63.9
Telford	56,939	52,554	92.2
Shrewsbury	58,000	—	—
Stoke and Newcastle Under Lyme	175,000	68,141	38.9
Stafford and Stone	37,271		
Lichfield/Burntwood/Rugeley	39,290	33,488	27.9
Tamworth/North Warwicks/Meriden	43,315		
Birmingham/Solihull	460,000	404,392	87.9
Wythall	4,000	—	—
Coventry	119,000	112,983	94.9
Stratford/Warwick/Leamington	50,000	57,509	100
Rugby	24,000	11,362	47.3
Daventry	8,710	—	—
Nuneaton/Bedworth	43,000	—	—

Figures provided by the Independent Television Commission.

Overall figures for the west midlands area (where construction has started).

Total homes in franchise areas: 1,513,715.

Total homes passed in franchise areas: 1,065,835.

Total percentage of homes passed in franchise areas: 70.4 per cent.

Mr. Roger Levitt

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) if she will make a statement on the application to extradite Mr. Roger Levitt from the United States of America; [14741]

(2) if she will make a statement on the advice given by her Department to the New York judge considering the application to extradite Mr. Roger Levitt; and if she will make a statement [14742]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: Mr. Roger Levitt is charged with an offence of making a false statement contrary to Section 451 of the Companies Act 1985. Acting on advice from independent counsel my Department submitted an extradition request to the United States of America in June 1997 through the Home Office.

It was for the District Attorney in New York to make representations to the New York judge considering the application. In doing so he made reference to advice from my Department about the facts of the case, about submissions made on Mr. Levitt's behalf to that judge and about the likely position in relation to bail in the UK in the event of Mr. Levitt's return.

The Divisional Court granted leave on 31 October from Mr. Levitt to apply for Judicial Review of the decision to request Mr. Levitt's extradition, and the request for such extradition.

In the light of arguments presented on behalf of Mr. Levitt my Department has reviewed the decision to request Mr. Levitt's extradition and has concluded that the extradition request should not be maintained. Accordingly it will be withdrawn. Warrants remain open in the UK for Mr. Levitt's arrest in connection both with the Section 451 offence and on a charge of breaching a company director disqualification order.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Radio Stations (West Midlands)

12. **Ms Jenny Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many broadcasting licences have been granted by the Radio Authority to radio stations in the west midlands since September 1996; and how many of these were granted to community radio stations. [13438]

Mr. Fisher: Since September 1996 the Radio Authority has granted one independent local radio licence in the West Midlands. The winning application, from 107.7 the Wolf, proposes a programme format dedicated to the specific needs of the community.

National Lottery

13. **Mr. Truswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will review the accessibility of lottery funding to bids for children's play initiatives; and if he will make a statement. [13439]

Mr. Chris Smith: In the White Paper, "The People's Lottery", I made it clear that we are particularly committed to the development of children's play. I am currently discussing with the Lottery distributors how we can best ensure that Lottery funding for it is more easily accessible.

15. **Mr. Gunnell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what criteria will be applied to consideration of lottery bids which include an estimate of revenue funding to ensure that successful existing institutions remain viable. [13442]

Mr. Chris Smith: It is for distributors to determine the detailed criteria for awards. For capital schemes, they may provide a revenue grant or an endowment to cover the costs of a project or to ensure its completion. We are looking at this area as part of the review of distribution announced in the White Paper, "The People's Lottery".

17. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for allocating national lottery money to health-related projects. [13444]

19. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for allocating lottery money to health-related projects. [13446]

25. **Dr. Stoate:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for allocating national lottery money to health-related projects. [13452]

Mr. Chris Smith: In the White Paper, "The People's Lottery", I announced the creation of a new good cause encompassing health, education and the environment. We want to enable people to improve their health and well-being, especially in the most deprived areas of the country. We therefore aim to establish a core network of healthy living centres, supported by the lottery, by 2001.

23. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he takes to ensure a reasonable balance of lottery grants for national, regional and local projects; and if he will make a statement. [13450]

Mr. Chris Smith: In the White Paper, "The People's Lottery", I announced our intention to ensure that Lottery money is spent according to a strategy drawn up in the light of need across all regions and parts of the country and between different groups in society. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has already announced a pilot scheme where some distributors will work together on small community grants in Scotland. We hope to see this kind of approach extended where appropriate as soon as possible.

Eastern Arts Board

14. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to meet the Chair and Director of the Eastern Arts Board to discuss the development of the arts in their region. [13440]

Mr. Fisher: I met the Chairman and Chief Executive of the Eastern Arts Board during my visit to Cambridge on 7 October. I was delighted to learn of the high quality of artistic activity in the region and was impressed with the commitment of Eastern Arts Board to the arts in the area.

Industrial Heritage

16. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the importance he attaches to the role of museums in preserving the country's industrial heritage. [13443]

Mr. Fisher: The industrial heritage is of immense importance to our understanding both of the past and the present. Museums have a crucial role to play in its preservation and interpretation.

UEFA Cup

18. **Mr. Godsiff:** To ask the Secretary of State of Culture, Media and Sport if he has raised with the European Commission the issue of UEFA debarring the winner of the Coca-Cola cup from participating in the UEFA Cup. [13445]

Mr. Banks: This is a matter for the Football Authorities and I understand the Football League is pursuing it with the European Commission. I share some of the concerns expressed and will be following developments with interest.

Film Industry

20. **Mr. Dennis Turner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress he is making in increasing the figures of British cinema audiences watching British films. [13447]

Mr. Tom Clarke: British films are enjoying a very successful year and we hope to build on that success. We have established an all-industry working group, headed by myself, and Mr. Stewart Till, Head of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, with the aim of doubling the domestic market share for British films. I expect the working group to report in February 1998.

Jazz

21. **Mr. O'Hara:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what role he plans for the Arts Council of England in developing audiences for jazz. [13448]

Mr. Fisher: Jazz is an art form without boundaries and with very many ardent supporters, including myself. The Arts Council of England published a jazz policy document last November. All the Council's funding for jazz is designed to develop and build new audiences; the Government agree that the development of audiences in all art forms is a high priority.

Millennium Projects

22. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been allocated to date by the Millennium Commission to projects to mark the millennium. [13449]

Mr. Chris Smith: Since its first grant announcement two years ago, the Millennium Commission has awarded a total of £1.015 billion to 114 projects on 2,720 sites, £19 million to 13 Award partners benefiting 8,000 individuals and £449 million to the New Millennium Experience at Greenwich.

Operetta

24. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his policy toward promoting provincial touring light operetta. [13451]

Mr. Fisher: My Department attaches a high priority to encouraging the widest possible range of touring artistic activity. The Arts Council of England is responsible for devising specific touring policies across artforms and by particular organisations. National companies, regional organisations and a range of specific bodies tour productions of light operetta around the country.

Arts (Accessibility)

26. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to make the arts more accessible to a wider range of people. [13453]

Mr. Chris Smith: Access is at the heart of my policies. I believe strongly that the public has a right to better access in return for the public funding which goes into the arts. I have made a number of specific proposals aimed at increasing access to the arts. These include plans to pilot open theatre nights and an Artscard scheme for young people. I will be announcing the results of our review of access to national museums and galleries within the next few weeks.

World Cup

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps the Government are taking to promote England's bid to host the World Cup in 2006. [14981]

Mr. Banks: I have just returned from accompanying an FA delegation to North and Central America to promote the World Cup bid. The trip was very successful and the Government will continue to offer all the support

they can to the FA. I will shortly be writing to hon. Members giving full details and exhorting them to use every opportunity to back the bid.

British Academy of Sport

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recommendations he has received from the English Sports Council, the British Olympic Association and other sporting organisations about the location of the British Academy of Sport. [13737]

Mr. Banks: We have received a number of representations from sporting organisations about the location of the British Academy of Sport. We are currently considering the United Kingdom Sports Council's recommendations on the location and will make an announcement shortly.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Irish Republic (British Subjects)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of British *(a)* subjects and *(b)* passport holders presently resident in the Irish Republic. [14050]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* There is no requirement for British subjects or those persons deemed never to have ceased to be British subjects to register or make themselves known to the British Embassy in Dublin. It is therefore impossible to estimate the number of British subjects resident in the Republic of Ireland. According to the Office for National Statistics, in 1995 there were approximately 50,000 British passport holders resident in the Republic of Ireland.

Surveillance Systems

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proposals have been made to his Department governing the use of evidence from CCTV cameras alone in securing criminal convictions; and if he will make a statement. [13762]

Mr. Michael: We have received no proposals which would affect the admissibility of evidence gathered by closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras. I have written to the hon. Member in response to this Question and his Question of 27 October, *Official Report,* column *568,* to confirm that rumours earlier this year were based on a spurious press report that a European Directive on Data Protection could affect the admissibility of CCTV evidence. It will not have any such effect. I have placed a copy of my letter in the Library, together with a copy of information provided by the European Commission.

Immigration

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications by persons of independent means had been dealt with by the immigration and nationality department in 1997, as at 1 October. [14240]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Persons of independent means[1] 1 January to 30 September 1997

	Number of persons[2]
Given leave to enter the country	50
After-entry application for an extension of stay dealt with[3]	220

[1] The requirement restricting persons of independent means to those who are at least 60 years old was introduced on 1 October 1994, but extant cases were not affected.
[2] Figures are provisional.
[3] Including persons of independent means seeking an extension of stay in another category or seeking settlement, and other persons seeking an extension of stay as a retired person of independent means.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the backlog of cases for each of the immigration and nationality directorate's divisions on 1 October. [14242]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Cases outstanding[1] in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at 1 October 1997

	Number[2] of cases
After Entry and Appeals Directorate[3]	17,000
Asylum Directorate[4]	52,500
European Directorate	3,900
Nationality Directorate	73,000
Immigration Service Enforcement Directorate[5]	24,000
Finance and Services Directorate[6]	6,100

[1] Includes unactioned cases and work in progress.
[2] Rounded to the nearest hundred.
[3] Includes referred entry clearance applications and appeals awaiting preparation of statements.
[4] Cases awaiting an initial decision and asylum appeals awaiting validation and preparation.
[5] Excluding cases where illegal entry papers have been served but there is an outstanding asylum application/appeal; these cases are included in the Asylum Directorate figure.
[6] Items of correspondence (mainly passports, letters and new applications being sorted and allocated to caseworkers).

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what, at 1 October, was the average waiting time for consideration of applications for each of the divisions of the immigration and nationality directorate. [14223]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is given in the table.

Average waiting time from receipt of application to decision for applications decided in the immigration and nationality directorate on 1 October 1997

	Months
After entry and appeals directorate[1]	4
Asylum directorate[2]:	
Pre-1993 Act applications	55
Post-1993 Act applications	13
European directorate[3]:	
Residence permits:	
11 per cent. within	1
35 per cent. within	2
67 per cent. within	6

Average waiting time from receipt of application to decision for applications decided in the immigration and nationality directorate on 1 October 1997

	Months
Residence documents:	
6 per cent. within	1
19 per cent. within	2
43 per cent. within	6
Nationality directorate:	
Naturalisations	17
Independent registrations[4]	6
Right of abode	5

[1] Data relate to the third quarter of 1997.
[2] Data relate to the six months March to August 1997.
[3] Data relate to cases dealt with in September 1997.
[4] Registration not dependent upon a parent's application for naturalisation.

Prisoners

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were held at each prison on 1 October; what is the design capacity of each prison; and what were the occupancy levels at 1 October as a percentage of that capacity. [14247]

Ms Quin: The number of prisoners held at each establishment in England and Wales on 1 October 1997 is listed in column one of the following table.

The Prison Service uses the concept of Certified Normal Accommodation (CNA) to define the uncrowded capacity of each establishment. For prisons built in recent years, this is equivalent to design capacity. The CNA measure can also be applied to older prisons, particularly those built in the last century, whose design capacity is no longer relevant because of significant building and/or modernisation work.

The CNA of each establishment is listed in column two of table 1. The occupancy level at each establishment is expressed as a percentage of CNA and can be found in column three of table 1.

Table 1—Population and CNA by Prison on 1 October 1997

Prison name	Population	CNA	Population to CNA (per cent.)
Acklington	652	662	98
Albany	434	436	100
Aldington	127	145	88
Ashwell	453	444	102
Askham Grange	126	130	97
Aylesbury	313	318	98
Bedford	393	347	113
Belmarsh	863	822	105
Birmingham	1,027	719	143
Blakenhurst	842	647	130
Blantyre House	120	120	100
Blundeston	402	424	95
Brinsford	535	477	112
Bristol	590	487	121
Brixton	579	483	120
Brockhill	121	159	76
Buckley Hall	382	350	109
Bullingdon	691	770	90
Bullwood Hall	126	126	100
Camphill	522	470	111
Canterbury	264	158	167
Cardiff	730	531	137
Castington	320	330	97
Channings Wood	608	482	126

Table 1—Population and CNA by Prison on 1 October 1997

Prison name	Population	CNA	Population to CNA (per cent.)
Chelmsford	465	448	104
Colchester	32	32	100
Coldingley	295	298	99
Cookham Wood	147	120	123
Dartmoor	622	578	108
Deerbolt	424	434	98
Doncaster	1,108	771	144
Dorchester	244	147	166
Dover	306	316	97
Downview	342	327	105
Drake Hall	277	281	99
Durham	937	667	140
East Sutton Park	99	94	105
Eastwood Park	136	135	101
Elmley	843	760	111
Erlestoke	305	310	98
Everthorpe	459	433	106
Exeter	465	267	174
Featherstone	595	599	99
Feltham	905	849	107
Ford	439	486	90
Foston	119	150	79
Frankland	455	447	102
Full Sutton	533	576	93
Garth	641	633	101
Gartree	370	364	102
Glen Parva	875	720	122
Gloucester	281	219	128
Grendon	438	461	95
Guys Marsh	322	300	107
Haslar	157	158	99
Hatfield	135	180	75
Haverigg	553	530	104
Hewell Grange	198	203	98
Highdown	719	649	111
Highpoint	698	679	103
Hindley	532	527	101
Hollesley Bay	445	458	97
Holloway	529	517	102
Holme House	871	971	90
Hull	491	519	95
Huntercombe	261	256	102
Kingston	117	129	91
Kirkham	666	702	95
Kirklevington	180	180	100
Lancaster	217	218	100
Lancaster Farms	492	496	99
Latchmere House	188	193	97
Leeds	914	800	114
Leicester	351	219	160
Lewes	490	485	101
Leyhill	366	410	89
Lincoln	638	434	147
Lindholme	693	686	101
Littlehey	643	624	103
Liverpool	1,502	1,216	124
Long Lartin	391	379	103
Low Newton	289	189	153
Maidstone	552	541	102
Manchester	1,029	852	121
Moorland	658	620	106
Morton Hall	203	208	98
Mount	629	588	107
New Hall	336	327	103
North Sea Camp	202	213	95
Northallerton	245	152	161
Norwich	746	570	131
Nottingham	413	401	103
Onley	611	550	111
Parkhurst	359	349	103
Pentonville	929	726	128
Portland	536	526	102
Preston	668	414	161
Ranby	581	518	112
Reading	240	203	118

Table 1—Population and CNA by Prison on 1 October 1997

Prison name	*Population*	*CNA*	*Population to CNA (per cent.)*
Risley	882	851	104
Rochester	398	433	92
Send	231	231	100
Shepton Mallet	216	158	137
Shrewsbury	332	181	183
Stafford	627	568	110
Standford Hill	300	384	78
Stocken	464	436	106
Stoke Heath	424	454	93
Styal	267	262	102
Sudbury	499	511	98
Swaleside	571	512	112
Swansea	348	260	134
Swinfen Hall	197	208	95
Thorn Cross	223	316	71
Usk	290	246	118
Verne	572	552	104
Wakefield	609	522	117
Wandsworth	907	811	112
Wayland	642	620	104
Wealstun	580	591	98
Weare	358	400	90
Wellingborough	321	352	91
Werrington	157	220	71
Wetherby	324	360	90
Whatton	222	226	98
Whitemoor	521	522	100
Winchester	612	463	132
Wolds	399	360	111
Woodhill	687	616	112
Wormwood Scrubs	1,363	1,171	116
Wymott	801	809	99
Total	62,706	57,630	109

Hampshire Police Authority

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what criteria he has used to determine which of the applications to be independent members of the Hampshire Police Authority he will approve; [14454]

(2) when the Hampshire Police Authority will receive confirmation of the Home Office's selections for new independent members of the Authority. [14455]

Mr. Michael: I have selected a shortlist of candidates to fill the vacancies for two independent members on the Hampshire Police Authority. My officials are writing to the Clerk to the Authority to inform him of the shortlisted candidates. The councillor and magistrate members of the Authority will then decide who from the shortlist should be appointed to the Authority.

The following criteria apply to the selection of all independent members:

As well as being of good character, independent members of police authorities should:

possess good communication skills;

be able to demonstrate the ability to challenge accepted views in a constructive way;

be able to represent a wide range of people in the community; have an understanding of their policing needs, and of the pressures and challenges which face the police themselves;

have skills and experience which would broaden the expertise available to the authority.

Applications for appointment as an independent member of a police authority are invited from all eligible persons irrespective of ethnic origin, religious belief, gender, sexual orientation, disability or any other irrelevant factor.

CS Spray

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Chief of West Mercia Police on the incident at a house in Bicton Heath, Shrewsbury on Sunday 26 October which led to a five month old baby being taken to hospital as a result of the effects of CS spray; and if he will make a statement. [14489]

Mr. Michael: West Mercia Police are unaware of an infant being exposed to CS during this incident, in which a man was sprayed, and no complaint has been received in respect of any such allegation.

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will call for a report from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis indicating the amount of CS spray which the Commissioner has *(a)* purchased and *(b)* distributed; if all police officers receiving the spray will be trained in its use and in official guidelines relating to its use; what arrangements he has made for its storage, and inventory; and if he will make a statement. [14482]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner tells me that the Metropolitan Police has made an initial purchase of 28,200 operational CS incapacitant sprays which have been distributed to all Operational Command Units. Prior to being issued with CS spray, officers will undertake an initial four hour training course. Additionally, they will receive refresher training at least once a year which emphasises the importance of after care for persons sprayed.

CS sprays will be stored in specifically designed secure cabinets at the Operational Command Units. These cabinets are marked in accordance with fire and chemical storage regulations. A detailed record is maintained in relation to all devices. Each device is individually serial numbered and is issued against signature. The record of issue is then updated following discharge or disposal of the device.

Deaths in Police Custody

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish the report on the circumstances of deaths in police custody; and if he will make a statement. [14484]

Mr. Michael: The report of the research by the Home Office Police Research Group into deaths in police custody from 1990 onwards is expected to be published at the turn of the year.

Elections (European Parliament)

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will change the polling day for the next election for the European Parliament from a Thursday to a Sunday. [14677]

Mr. George Howarth: We do not think it would be right to change the polling day for the 1999 elections to the European Parliament, which will be held under a new regional list system.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Bayley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current number of prisoners in England and Wales held on remand for a period *(a)* up to three months, *(b)* over three months and up to six months, *(c)* over six months and up to 12 months and *(d)* over 12 months. [14546]

Ms Quin: The latest available provisional information for England and Wales is for 30 June 1997 and is given in the table. This information is also published in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics, England and Wales" (tables 2.3 and 2.4 of the 1996 edition, Cm 3732), copies of which are in the Library.

Remand prisoners in prisons in England and Wales by length of time since first reception[1] on 30 June 1997

Time since first remand	*30 June 1997*[2]
Up to and including three months	8,100
More than three months, up to and including six months	2,300
More than six months, up to and including 12 months	1,400
Over 12 months	300
Total	12,100

[1] Awaiting trial or sentence. Time since first reception on remand into a Prison Service establishment. This includes any intervening time spent on bail, but excludes time spent in police cells beforehand.

[2] Rounded provisional estimates.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the potential effects on remand prisoners' rights to a fair trial of arbitrary restrictions in the period leading up to and during their court appearances; what steps he has taken to ensure that the Prison Service is aware of this problem; and what special measures exist for the supervision monitoring of the treatment of prisoners in these circumstances. [13091]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* It is our policy that detention must not affect a person's right to a fair trial. In recognition of their special status, all unconvicted prisoners have extra privileges such as: the right to wear their own clothing; the right not to work; the right to extra visits, telephone calls and letters; and the right to continue their (legitimate) business activities. In addition, all prisons have legal aid officers and access to unlimited visits with their legal representative. Nearly all local prisons and remand centres have bail information schemes which assist prisoners to obtain bail if appropriate.

Both Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons and the Prison Service Standards Audit, on their visits to local prisons, seek to ensure that the rights and privileges of unconvicted prisons are observed.

Mr. Ronnie Clark

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in the investigation of the death of Mr. Ronnie Clark in Wellingborough prison on 1 March; and if he will make a statement. [14486]

Ms Quin: The inquest into the death of Mr. Clarke was held on 9 October 1997 at Kettering Coroner's Court. The jury returned a unanimous open verdict. The Coroner made no criticism of either the actions of staff or Prison Service policy and procedure.

The Prison Service will consider the findings of the Coroner's investigation, together with its own inquiries, to examine carefully whether there are any lessons to be learned.

Prison Medical Staff

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison establishments in England and Wales provide an induction programme for staff joining the Prison Service from the national health service. [14505]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* All Prison Service establishments are expected to arrange a two-week induction programme under the guidance of a senior medical officer for all new entrant medical staff whether they are from the National Health Service or elsewhere.

In addition, new entrant doctors are expected to attend a week long centrally organised course within six months of joining the Prison Service.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison establishments in England and Wales are currently without a full or part-time medical officer. [14507]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* Fourteen establishments currently have vacancies for either full or part-time permanently appointed medical officers. Where appropriate medical cover at these establishments is augmented by the use of locum doctors. The Prison Service holds periodic recruitment drives to fill such vacancies, and the next one will be held shortly.

Danny McNamee

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will review the security classification of Gilbert (Danny) McNamee; and if this prisoner will be returned to a special secure unit prior to or during his forthcoming hearing at the Court of Appeal. [13090]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* Decisions concerning the security categorisation of Gilbert (Danny) McNamee, who is located in a Northern Ireland prison, are a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

Should Mr. McNamee return to this jurisdiction for any reason, an assessment of his security category will be made in the light of security information available at the time.

Special Secure Units

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners are presently detained in each special secure unit stating *(a)* the nature of the crimes for which they were convicted and *(b)* their security category status. [13089]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* There are seven prisoners, all Category A Exceptional Escape Risk prisoners, held in Whitemoor Special Secure Unit. Two were convicted of importation of drugs; two of customs evasion; and the remaining three prisoners of murder, conspiracy to murder and armed robbery, respectively. Full Sutton Special Secure Unit is temporarily closed and the accommodation which formed the Unit at Belmarsh now only holds Category A High Escape Risk prisoners and is not run as a Special Secure Unit.

Prisons (Drug Misuse)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of *(a)* doctors and *(b)* other staff, currently working in the Prison Service, have received any recognised training in dealing with drug misusers. [14506]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* Forty-eight out of 197 (25 per cent.) doctors working in the Prison Service have either a Diploma in Addictive Behaviour or Membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists which will have included training in substance misuse. A further 26 doctors have started diploma level training during 1996–97.

Information is not centrally available in the form requested for other Prison Service staff. However, during 1996–97 over 230 health care staff attended a two day substance awareness course specifically designed for that purpose. In addition, 44 staff started diploma level training on substance misuse.

Life Sentences

Mr. Wood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners in England and Wales are presently serving a life sentence; and what is the total annual cost of keeping these prisoners in custody. [14909]

Ms Quin: The latest available information is for 30 September 1997. On that date there were 3,794 life sentence prisoners in England and Wales. Information on life sentence prisoners is also published in "Prison Statistics, England and Wales" (Chapter 8 of the 1996 edition, Cm 3732), a copy of which is in the Library.

Information on the cost of prisoners by their type of sentence is not collected centrally. The average annual net operating cost of a prison place in 1996–97 was £24,775.

Human Rights

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what further consideration he plans to give to the possible establishment of a Human Rights Commission. [14761]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have nothing to add at this stage to what we said about this in paragraph 3.8–3.12 of the White Paper "Rights Brought Home: The Human Rights Bill" (Cm 3782), which we published on 24 October, and during the Second Reading debate in Another Place on 3 November.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what functions a Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights would perform; and what powers would be vested in it. [14760]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have nothing to add at this stage to what we said about this in paragraph 3.6–3.7 of the White Paper "Rights Brought Home: The Human Rights Bill" (Cm 3782), which we published on 24 October, and during the Second Reading debate in Another Place on 3 November.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what statistical monitoring is undertaken in relation to the detention and imprisonment of asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [15174]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Statistical information on persons who had sought asylum and were detained as at specific points in time is available. A copy of the most recent statistics is attached.

Table 1: Number of people recorded as being detained[1,2] on 31 October 1997 who had sought asylum at some stage, by gender and immigration status

Gender	*Port*	*Illegal entrants*	*Subject to deportation action*	*Total*
Male	283	352	56	691
Female	33	14	2	49
Total	316	366	58	740

[1] Persons detained solely under the powers contained in Schedule 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971.

[2] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Table 2: Number of people recorded as being detained[1,2] on 31 October 1997 who had sought asylum at some stage, by stage of application and immigration status

Stage of application	*Port*	*Illegal entrants*	*Subject to deportation action*	*Total*
Awaiting initial decision	158	166	8	332
Awaiting result of appeal	104	90	28	222
Awaiting result of further challenge or documentation for removal[3]	54	110	22	186
Total	316	366	58	740

[1] Persons detained solely under the powers contained in Schedule 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971.

[2] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

[3] Includes those persons awaiting the result of a further appeal/other challenge or awaiting removal pending documentation.

Table 3: Number of people recorded as being detained[1,2] on 31 October 1997 who had sought asylum at some stage, by length of detention[3] and immigration status.

Length	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation action	Total
0–1 Month[1]	109	109	10	228
1–2 Months	83	87	8	178
2–6 Months	85	118	24	227
6–12 Months	28	47	12	87
12 Months +	11	5	4	20
Total	316	366	58	740

[1] Persons detained solely under the powers contained in Schedule 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971.

[2] These figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

[3] In some cases the date a person enters detention may be understated due to the method of recording.

Table 4: Number of people recorded as being detained[1,2] on 31 October 1997 who had sought asylum at some stage, by nationality and immigration status

Nationality	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation action	Total
India	15	79	2	96
Nigeria	40	34	14	88
Pakistan	19	30	7	56
Algeria	13	28	6	47
China People's Republic of	14	21	0	35
Ghana	12	12	3	27
Turkey	10	16	0	26
Romania	2	23	0	25
Czech Republic	22	2	0	24
Yugoslavia	9	15	0	24
Bangladesh	6	13	3	22
Kenya	19	2	1	22
Sri Lanka	9	9	3	21
Albania	3	15	0	18
Cyprus	13	2	0	15
Slovakia	15	0	0	15
Angola	7	4	2	13
Bulgaria	9	1	2	12
Gambia	6	1	2	9
Ivory Coast	5	3	0	8
Jamaica	1	3	4	8
Lithuania	4	2	1	7
Poland	1	6	0	7
Russia	1	6	0	7
Sudan	4	3	0	7
South Africa	5	1	1	7
Uganda	7	0	0	7
Ecuador	6	0	0	6
Colombia	5	0	0	5
Iran	4	1	0	5
Morocco	2	2	0	4
Ukraine (Ukrainian SS)	0	3	1	4
Afghanistan	1	2	0	3
Lebanon	2	1	0	3
Somalia	3	0	0	3
Tanzania	2	0	1	3
Armenia	0	2	0	2
Guinea	2	0	0	2
Kazakhstan	0	2	0	2
Liberia	2	0	0	2
Libya (Arab Republic)	0	2	0	2
Nepal	0	2	0	2
Philippines	1	1	0	2
Palestine	1	1	0	2

Table 4: Number of people recorded as being detained[1,2] on 31 October 1997 who had sought asylum at some stage, by nationality and immigration status

Nationality	Port	Illegal entrants	Subject to deportation action	Total
Sierra Leone	1	1	0	2
Tunisia	0	1	1	2
Ukraine	2	0	0	2
Zaire	2	0	0	2
Zimbabwe	1	1	0	2
Nationality doubtful	2	8	0	10
Others	6	5	4	15
Total	316	366	58	740

[1] Persons detained solely under the powers contained in Schedule 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971.

[2] Those figures include people who have been in detention for less than a month. Because of the delay in recording receptions into, and releases from, detention and the large number of persons detained for a short period, the figures should be used with caution.

Freemasonry (Police and Judiciary)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans the Government have to implement the Home Affairs Committee's recommendations on freemasonry in the police and judiciary (Third report, Session 1996–97, HC 192). [15283]

Mr. Michael: I will be writing to the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee later this month with the Government's response to the Committee's recommendation on freemasonry in the police and judiciary. A copy of my letter will be placed in the Library.

Firearms

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of *(a)* the likely total cost of the compensation scheme under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997 and *(b)* the number of claims still to be made; [14811]

(2) what is the average time taken to settle claims for compensation under options (i) A and (ii) B under the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997; and in each case, how many claims have been settled and what is the total value of the compensation paid to date. [14810]

Mr. Michael: Our estimate of the total cost of the compensation scheme remains £166 million. All claims had to have been made by the end of the surrender period on 30 September. Over 38,000 claims have been received in the Firearms Compensation Section from police forces. The average time to settle claims under both options A and B is currently 13 weeks.

To date, 15,000 payments have been made at a cost of over £20 million.

"The Mail on Sunday"

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he plans to apply for the lifting of the injunction presently in force against *The Mail on Sunday.* [14696]

Mr. Straw: No. The injunction remains necessary in order to prevent the publication of any further material which could damage national security. I would also refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), *6 November 1997, Official Report,* column *215.*

Proposed Prisons

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment exercises his Department has conducted into the possibility of establishing an extra prison in the *(a)* West Chelmsford constituency and *(b)* mid Essex area during the past five years. [15072]

Ms Quin: During the last five years, the Prison Service has had brought to its attention a number of sites in Essex for the possible construction of new prisons. None of these were in the West Chelmsford constituency and, without exception, to date all have been considered unsuitable.

House of Lords Judgments

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he intends to implement the House of Lords judgment in Regina v Secretary of State for the Home Department ex parte Pierson given on 24 July. [15640]

Mr. Straw: This judgment concerned the discretion of any holder of my office to increase a tariff once set for an adult convicted of murder. The majority of the House found that it is lawful for the Secretary of State to increase a tariff previously set, as set out in a reply given by my predecessor, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) on 27 July 1993, *Official Report,* columns *863–65.* However, one of that majority found that that statement did not purport to apply to a decision to increase a tariff set before 27 July 1993, and so a different majority found that the increase of the tariff in the Pierson case was unlawful.

So far as the procedures for setting and reviewing tariffs of adult murderers are concerned, I am continuing the practice of my predecessor, as described in his answers of 27 July 1993, *Official Report,* columns *861–64* and 7 December 1994, *Official Report,* columns *234–35.* In particular, before setting tariff, I am continuing to take the advice of the trial judge and the Lord Chief Justice, informing the prisoner of the substance of that advice and inviting representations about it, and giving reasons for any departure on my part from the judicial review.

With regard to the discretion to alter tariff, I reiterate that the view which I take (or a Minister acting under my authority takes) at the beginning of a mandatory life sentence, of the period necessary to satisfy the requirements of retribution and deterrence is an initial view of the minimum period necessary to satisfy those requirements. It therefore remains possible for me, or a future Secretary of State, exceptionally to revise that view of the minimum period, either by reducing it, or by increasing it where I, or a successor in my office, conclude that, putting aside questions of risk, the minimum requirements of retribution and deterrence will not have been satisfied at the expiry of the period which had previously been determined. The procedure for considering any increase of a tariff once set will include the opportunity for the prisoner to make representations after being informed that the Secretary of State is minded to increase tariff, and to be given reasons for any subsequent decision to increase it.

So far as the potential for a reduction in tariff is concerned, I shall be open to the possibility that, in exceptional circumstances, including for example, exceptional progress by the prisoner whilst in custody, a review and reduction of the tariff may be appropriate. I shall have this possibility in mind when reviewing at the 25 year point the cases of prisoners given a whole life tariff and in that respect will consider issues beyond the sole criteria of retribution and deterrence described in the answer given on 7 December 1994. Prisoners will continue to be given the opportunity to make representations and to have access to the material before me.

I intend to apply these policies in respect of all tariffs for adult murderers, whether or not they were originally set before 27 July 1993 and whether or not they were originally fixed by me personally, or a Minister acting on my behalf, or by or on behalf of a previous holder of my office. In the Pierson case, where the tariff has now been quashed, I intend to invite representations from the prisoner before re-setting tariff at a level which I consider appropriate.

I take the opportunity to confirm that my approach on the release of adults convicted of murder once tariff has expired will reflect the policy set out in the answer given 27 July 1993. In particular, the release of such a person will continue to depend not only on the expiry of tariff and on my being satisfied that the level of risk of his committing further imprisonable offences presented by his release is acceptably low, but also on the need to maintain public confidence in the system of criminal justice. The position of a prisoner subject to a mandatory life sentence continues to be distinct from that of a prisoner serving a discretionary life sentence, a decision on whose final release is a matter for the Parole Board alone.

Everything in this answer about my practice in relation to mandatory life sentence prisoners applies equally to persons who are, or will be, sentenced, to custody for life under section 8 of the Criminal Justice Act 1982. For present purposes, a life sentence imposed under section 2 of the Crime (Sentences) Act 1997 is treated as a discretionary life sentence.

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he intends to implement the House of Lords judgment in Regina V Secretary of State for the Home Department ex parte V and T given on 12 June. [15641]

Mr. Straw: This judgment was concerned with the periods of imprisonment, known as the tariff, set by my predecessor, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) as being necessary to reflect the requirements of retribution and deterrence in the cases of the two boys convicted of the murder of James Bulger. The House of Lords concluded that the current arrangements for reviewing tariff in the cases of offenders under the age of eighteen, convicted of murder and sentenced to detention at Her Majesty's pleasure under section 53(1) of the Children and Young Persons

Act 1933, failed adequately to reflect the distinctive nature of that sentence. In particular, the judgment requires that the initial view of what is necessary by way of retribution and deterrence should be capable of reduction in the light of the offender's personal development while in custody, and that the offender's personal development should therefore be considered alongside the public interest in retribution and deterrence in keeping the tariff period under review.

The House of Lords did not conclude, however, that the sentence of detention at Her Majesty's pleasure was purely reformative in character, nor that the Secretary of State's declaration of an initial view of what was necessary by way of retribution and deterrence was unlawful. The public properly expects the unique crime of murder to attract an appropriate punishment, regardless of the age or circumstances of the offender. It is in the interests of victims' families, public confidence, and of the individual offender that a clear indication should be given, relatively quickly following conviction, of the Secretary of State's initial view of the minimum period of imprisonment necessary to reflect the seriousness of the particular offence. I intend to continue to provide that initial view as at present, taking into account the advice of the trial judge and the Lord Chief Justice, any representations made on the offender's behalf and the overarching requirements of public confidence in the sentence of detention at Her Majesty's pleasure. That initial view will continue also to reflect an awareness of the offender's age and personal circumstances at the time of conviction.

Public confidence in the sentence will not be maintained if that initial tariff is curtailed lightly or as a matter of course. Rather, it should be reduced only where the balance between the public interest in punishment on the one hand, and the public interest in the offender's welfare on the other, has clearly shifted so as to justify such a reduction. Moreover, the more serious the circumstances of the offence, as reflected in the length of the initial tariff, the higher will be the threshold at which the public interest in the offender's welfare may outweigh the public interest in the offender's punishment.

However, I have also to act on the House of Lords' conclusion that the law requires the sentence's effect upon the offender to be kept under review and that there may be circumstances in which the desirability of promoting the child's eventual re-integration into society may justify a revision of the initial view on tariff.

Taking these considerations into account, this is the new procedure which I shall adopt. I shall continue to seek the advice of the trial judge and of the Lord Chief Justice in deciding what punishment is required in any individual case of a person convicted under section 53(1) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933. I shall then set an initial tariff with that advice, and the offender's personal circumstances, in mind. I shall continue to invite representations on the prisoner's behalf and give reasons for decisions.

Officials in my Department will receive annual reports on the progress and development of young people sentenced under section 53(1) whose initial tariff has yet to expire. Where there appears to be a case for considering a reduction in tariff, that will be brought to the attention of Ministers.

When half of the initial tariff period has expired, I, or a Minister acting on my behalf, will consider a report on the prisoner's progress and development, and invite representations on the question of tariff, with a view to determining whether the tariff period originally set is still appropriate. In complex and difficult cases, I shall seek the assistance of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health in securing independent professional advice (that is to say, independent of those already charged with the care of the offender) on the young offender's condition and development.

Any request for a review of tariff before it expires will be considered on its merits, whether that request is made by or on behalf of the offender or by one of the agencies or individuals responsible for his or her care.

In considering requests, inviting representations, and in conducting reviews, I will look for evidence of:

- significant alteration in the offender's maturity and outlook since the commission of the offence;
- risks to the offender's continued development that cannot be sufficiently mitigated or removed in the custodial environment;
- any matter that calls into question the basis of the original decision to set tariff at a particular level (for example, about the circumstances of the offence itself or the offender's state of mind at the time);

together with any other matter which appears relevant.

So far as the offender's age is concerned. I shall take into account the Government's international and domestic obligations to children under the age of 18 in deciding where the balance between the public interest in punishment and the public interest in the offender's welfare lies. That balance will also have been at the heart of the decision on the proper length of the initial tariff.

Where I consider that the offender's welfare may be seriously prejudiced by his or her continued imprisonment, and that the public interest in the offender's welfare outweighs the public interest in a further period of imprisonment lasting at least until the expiry of the provisionally set tariff, I will decide to reduce the tariff. In these circumstances, release on or after tariff expiry will be dependent on the question of risk, decided in the same way as at present.

There are currently 106 such offenders whose tariffs have been set but have not yet expired. My officials will write to each of them with the text of this statement asking if they wish to have their tariff reviewed in the way I have described, and, if so, on what grounds. I will, in any event, undertake reviews in each of the 74 cases where the halfway point of the tariff has been passed but where there are still two years or more to serve before tariff expires. The cases of those closest to tariff expiry will be considered first.

I believe the procedure I have described fully meets the requirement to keep the imprisonment of offenders sentenced to detention at Her Majesty's pleasure under review, and to treat such cases in a distinct way, having regard to the public interest in the welfare of children alongside the public interest in the proper and proportionate punishment of offenders. No one who has committed murder and is sentenced to detention at Her Majesty's pleasure will be released unless two conditions are satisfied: first, the tariff period necessary for

punishment must have been served; and, secondly, the Parole Board must be satisfied that the risk posed to the public by the offender's release would be acceptably low.

The tariffs set by my predecessor in the two particular cases considered by the House of Lords have been quashed. I intend to consider reports, invite representations on behalf of those offenders, and seek independent professional advice, before resetting an initial tariff within the terms of this statement, taking into account also the criticism contained in the judgement of the reasons given by my predecessor.

Prison Service Management and Organisation

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Director General's review of management and organisation of the Prison Service. [15642]

Mr. Straw: The Director General has now completed an internal review of the management and organisation of the Prison Service.

The review has recommended, and I have endorsed, a programme of action with the following key elements:

(i) measures to assert and reinforce Ministerial responsibility for the Prison Service. The Government have already made clear their commitment to taking proper Ministerial responsibility for the Prison Service. Parliamentary Questions are now answered by Ministers and not by the Director General. Further measures to be taken in the light of this review are as follows:

- from 1 January Ministers will chair quarterly meetings to review formally the performance and plans of the Prison Service. The report concludes, and I agree, that in the circumstances of the Prison Service such an arrangement better supports the Government's approach to Ministerial oversight than any form of separate Advisory Board;
- the Agency Framework Document will be updated and reissued with a new Ministerial preface when the Comprehensive Spending Review is further advanced;
- the Prison Service will take action to develop a greater sensitivity to the nature and demands of Ministerial responsibility for the Service at all levels in the Agency. This will be reflected in specific training programmes and in key documentation.

(ii) a new focus on the delivery of effective prison regimes and preparation for the release of prisoners. The Government are committed to the development of constructive prison regimes which address offending behaviour. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons has drawn attention to, and been critical of, the wide variation in standard levels of performance between prisons of the same type. The review concludes that an improvement in performance in this area is required; and that the top management of the Prison Service is not, at present, organised in such a way as to deliver the necessary leadership and direction required to secure an improvement. The Prison Service will, therefore:

- plan for and seek substantial improvements in the effectiveness of regimes and the preparation of prisoners for release, while continuing to maintain its performance in relation to security and control; and
- create a stronger capacity within Headquarters to develop regime standards and polices for all prisoner groups and to support the operational line in monitoring performance and spreading best practice. This will be provided by a Director of Regimes at Prisons Board level, supported by Assistant Directors with separate, specific responsibility for: young offenders; women; adult males, lifers and parole; and prisoner administration.

(iii) a major programme of change to improve the managerial effectiveness of the organisation. This reflects the need for:

- the Prisons Board itself to operate more strategically and effectively. Responsibilities will be clarified at Board level, with separate policy Directors of Regimes, Security and Healthcare. One policy Director will be designated as Deputy Director General and will deputise for the Director General in his absence and ensure effective co-ordination of the day day to work of the Service;
- more effective standard-setting and performance management systems. A clear set of core standards will be formulated, supported by a set of functional standards for different types of prisoner and prison. The contact between the Governor and the Area Manager will be used as the key business management tool of the Prison Service; and in the longer term the Service will move towards the replacement of contracts with more formal service level agreements, providing a form of internal purchaser/provider arrangement;
- a major investment in management development and training will be taken forward when the Prison Service can identify efficiency savings. The net for recruiting managers to all levels in the Prison Service will also be widened.

I welcome the outcome of this review—not least because it is the product of an internal, rather than externally imposed, analysis. None of the proposals to be implemented is intended to pre-empt the outcome of the wider review of the Prison and Probation Services which I announced in reply to a Question from the hon. Member for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith). *Official Report*, column *172*, or the Comprehensive Spending Review, which are proceeding in parallel. The action proposed will, however, help to position the Prison Service for whatever changes may emerge from these reviews and make improvements which are needed in their own right. The Review will be taken forward within existing Prison Services resources.

I am placing copies of the Review in the Library.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Immigration Appeals

37. **Mr. Vaz:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what proposals he has to clear the backlog of cases in the Immigration Tribunal. [13464]

Mr. Hoon: The backlog of outstanding adjudicator appeals is starting to come down. It has fallen by 1,721 appeals since the end of July. We are appointing more adjudicators and giving them the help they need to deal with more cases.

Secret Societies

39. **Mr. Mullin:** to ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has for requiring members of the judiciary to disclose membership of secret societies; and if he will make a statement. [13467]

Mr. Hoon: The Home Affairs Committee, of which my hon. Friend is now the Chairman, recommended shortly before the election that police officers, magistrates, judges and crown prosecutors should be required to register membership of any secret society. The Government are considering the recommendations contained in that report and will respond to the Committee in due course.

Legal Aid

38. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what primary legislation his Department intends to introduce in relation to legal aid. [13465]

Mr. Hoon: Extending conditional fees to all civil, but not family, cases, and withdrawing legal aid from most civil claims for money or damages, can be done under existing legislation. Subject to consultation, we expect to bring in the necessary regulations soon. Making contracting the only way to provide legal aid services, and changing the merits test to reflect the availability of resources, will need primary legislation. I hope to be able to bring forward a new Legal Aid Bill in due course.

41. **Mr. Steen:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what is his policy toward controlling the legal aid budget. [13469]

Mr. Hoon: I propose to control the legal aid budget by ensuring that legal aid is targeted to where it can do most good and is used only where no appropriate alternative method of funding is available. For the longer term I wish to see legal aid being delivered under contracts that will define the price quality and quantity of service to be provided tailored to the local needs of the community.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what measures his Department is taking to ensure consistency in decisions relating to the granting of legal aid. [14930]

Mr. Hoon: Civil legal aid is granted by the Legal Aid Board in accordance with the statutory merits test. The Board use a number of procedures to ensure the test is applied consistently. There is a programme of work to improve the decision making process in the Legal Aid Board Area Offices, through the revision of existing guidance and the production of new guidance. My officials are also reviewing the operation of the merits test with the Legal Aid Board.

In addition the Lord Chancellor recently announced plans to tighten the merits test so that a case would generally need a 75 per cent. chance of success in order to receive legal aid unless there were other compelling reasons for granting it. It is also proposed that the decision to grant should also take account of the available resources. However it would require primary legislation to give effect to these proposals.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what was the cost of legal aid in each of the last three years *(a)* exclusive and *(b)* inclusive of VAT. [15069]

Mr. Hoon: Net expenditure on legal aid for the last three years is as follows:

1994–95: £1,298.7 million

1995–96: £1,390.5 million

1996–97: £1,475.7 million

Information on VAT is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. Since not all disbursements attract VAT, and not all solicitors and counsel have always been registered for VAT, it is not possible to calculate the total VAT that is paid out of the Legal Aid Fund.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list *(a)* the amount of expenditure on the Green Form scheme for 1996-97 and *(b)* the percentage of that expenditure which relates to (i) immigration, (ii) welfare benefits, (iii) debt, (iv) consumer and (v) other. [14931]

Mr. Hoon: Net expenditure on the Green Form scheme, in 1996–97, was £151 million. Expenditure, as a percentage and by category of advice given, was as follows:

Immigration and Nationality[1] 17 per cent.

Welfare Benefits 9 per cent.

Debt 4 per cent.

Consumer 2 per cent.

Other 68 per cent.

[1] It is not possible to identify separately the cost of advice given in respect of immigration matters.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (1) what percentage of the statutory charge was recovered by the Legal Aid Board in each of the last three years; [15070]

(2) what is the total value of the statutory charge currently owed to the Legal Aid Board. [15068]

Mr. Hoon: Moneys recovered by way of the statutory charge relate to cases where charges have been outstanding over a number of years, and therefore there is no annual total statutory charge against which the moneys recovered in the same year could be measured as a percentage.

The total value of quantified statutory charges outstanding at the end of the 1996–97 financial year was £185.9 million.

40. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on his plans to reform legal aid. [13468]

43. **Mr. John M. Taylor:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement about his future plans for legal aid. [13471]

44. **Ann Clwyd:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the proposed reforms of the legal aid system. [13472]

Mr. Hoon: Our plans for legal aid reform were announced by my right hon. and noble Friend the Lord Chancellor in his recent speech to the Law Society Annual Conference. Subject to consultation, we intend to make conditional fees available for all civil non-family cases; to withdraw legal aid from most claims for money or damages; and to make contracting the universal way of procuring legal aid services. These changes will allow us to target scarce resources on the people who need them most, and will bring the cost of legal aid under better control and improve quality and value for money.

Civil Cases (Conditional Fees)

42. **Mr. Kidney:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the impact on poor litigants of a system of conditional fees in respect of civil cases. [13470]

Mr. Hoon: My officials are currently talking to interested parties to ensure that all can benefit from the extension of conditional fees that I propose.

Statute of Limitations

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when the review of the Statute of Limitations will be published. [13466]

Mr. Hoon: The Law Commission is in the process of carrying out a review of the complex law of limitation periods and expects to publish a consultation paper by the end of this year or very early in 1998. Following the consultation period, which is likely to end in April 1998, responses will be analysed and final recommendations will be drawn up for publication in a Law Commission Report. It is too early yet to say when that report will be ready for publication.

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what measures he is taking to ensure that those claiming compensation for injuries incurred at work are not obliged to prove that their injury was caused by another. [14569]

Mr. Hoon: The arguments on whether or not the burden of proof should be reversed in respect of accidents occurring in the workplace are finely balanced and the Government have no plans to disturb the existing arrangements. In a report recently presented to the Lord Chancellor by Sir Peter Middleton, a recommendation was made that the possible advantages of no-fault compensation schemes be examined. The Government are considering this together with Sir Peter's other recommendations.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14385]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 5 November, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Magistrates Courts

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received in respect of proposals to close the magistrates court in Tavistock; and if he will make a statement. [14041]

Mr. Hoon: I have received one representation in respect of Devon Magistrates' Courts Committee's proposals to close the Tavistock Magistrates' Court.

Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of magistrates' court committees (MCC). Decisions concerning the future of any magistrates' court are for the relevant MCC to determine, in consultation with the local paying authority.

Under section 56 of the Justices of the Peace Act 1997, the Lord Chancellor's responsibility in relation to magistrates' courts is limited to that of an appellate court in a dispute between the MCC and its paying authority over a proposed court closure.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he will consult on the future of magistrates courts. [14033]

Mr. Hoon: Magistrates' courts are provided by the local paying authority for the use of the magistrates' courts committee (MCC). Decisions concerning the future of individual magistrates' courts are for the relevant magistrates' courts committee to determine, in consultation with the local paying authority. The paying authority may appeal to the Lord Chancellor against a proposed closure. That is the only time my Department becomes involved. I have, therefore no plans to consult on the future of magistrates' courts.

More generally, I refer the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton to the statement that I made in the House on 29 October, *Official Report*, columns 901–14, a copy of which is in the library.

Conditional Fees

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many representations he has received in support of the proposals set out in the recent statement about the extension of conditional fees; and if he will make a statement. [14085]

Mr. Hoon: My Department has had in the region of thirty inquiries from individual members of the public. The overwhelming message is that the proposed extension of conditional fees will be a real answer to the real problem they face of being denied access to justice through unaffordable lawyers' fees.

HEALTH

Winter Mortality Rates

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list winter death rates *(a)* for the whole population, *(b)* for those over pensionable age, *(c)* for those aged over 65 years and *(d)* per 1,000 population for those EU countries for which statistics are available. [14257]

Mrs. Liddell: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from John Fox to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated November 1997:

The Director of the Office for National Statistics has been asked to answer your recent question on excess winter deaths. In his absence, I am replying as the Director of the Census, Population and Health Group.

Based on the latest available data, the estimated numbers of excess deaths in England and Wales during the 1996–97 winter, are given in the table below.

Excess winter deaths are defined as the number of deaths in the four months from December to March less the average of the numbers during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

There were 0.9 excess winter deaths per 1,000 population in 1996/97 in England and Wales. The Office for National Statistics does not compile comparable figures for other EU countries.

	Excess winter deaths
Whole population	48,600
Over pensionable age	45,600
65 years and over	44,800

Mental Health (Extra-contractual Referrals)

Mr. Hurst: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much of the national health service budget was spent in the last financial year in the private sector in order to treat mental health extra-contractual referrals. [13124]

Mr. Boateng: The provisional figure of total expenditure by health authorities, general practitioner fundholders and National Health Service trusts on the purchase of health care from the private sector amounted to £594 million in 1996–97, the latest year available. This cannot be broken down into the type of services purchased from the private sector.

Dental Services

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the average list size of dentists with NHS patients in *(a)* North Staffordshire, *(b)* West Midlands and *(c)* nationally; and if he will make a statement. [14254]

Mr. Milburn: At June 1997, the average number of adults and children registered for each General Dental Service dentist was 2,044 in North Staffordshire, 1,913 in West Midlands and 1,622 in England.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on standards of dental health in *(a)* North Staffordshire, *(b)* West Midlands and *(c)* nationally. [14255]

Mr. Milburn: One clear measure of the standards of oral health is the incidence of dental caries. The British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry co-ordinates annual surveys of dental caries prevalence in different aged children. The attached tables show the most recent data for the mean number of decayed, missing and filled in deciduous teeth only of five-year-old children, and in the permanent teeth only of twelve and fourteen-year-old children in North Staffordshire, West Midlands and England. Similar data for adults are published every ten years. However, since the most recent data are based on a survey in 1988 and are therefore not particularly up-to-date, they are not presented here.

By tradition the acronym for decayed, missing and filled teeth is shown in upper case for permanent teeth—DMFT—and in lower case for deciduous teeth—dmft.

Mean number of dmft of five-year-olds[1] in 1995–96

	Number
North Staffordshire	1.81
West Midlands	1.08
England	1.63

[1] Deciduous teeth only.

Mean number of DMFT of twelve-year-olds[1] in 1992–93

	Number
North Staffordshire	1.17
West Midlands	0.85
England	1.15

[1] Permanent teeth only.

Mean number of DMFT of fourteen-year-olds[1] in 1994–95

	Number
North Staffordshire	1.99
West Midlands	1.24
England	1.67

[1] Permanent teeth only.

Private Finance Initiative

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the revenue consequences of capital investments undertaken to date under the private finance initiative, listing all such schemes and the financing costs excluding any ongoing staffing costs; and if he will compare these costs with those pertaining under traditional public borrowing. [14031]

Mr. Milburn: The amount paid to the private sector under Private Finance Initiative contracts will vary depending on the level and quality of service.

The annual unitary payments for the two major acute sector PFI schemes that have reached financial close are expected to be:

Dartford and Gravesham NHS Trust: £18.6 million

Carlisle NHS Trust: £10.9 million

The unitary payment is the cost of providing a fully serviced hospital facility. It includes elements of cost for the provision and maintenance of assets, the management of facilities, and financing. To be approved a PFI contract must offer better, or comparable, value for money to the publicly funded alternative.

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the capital investment by the NHS in health care projects *(a)* in total and *(b)* within the Birmingham local authority area in each of the last five years up to and including 1996–97, and in each five year period since 1972–73 at actual and constant 1996–97 prices, separately identifying expenditure under the private finance initiative. [14030]

Mr. Milburn: The table shows the total amount of publicly financed capital expenditure within the Hospital and Community Health Services in England and within NHS trusts and hospitals in the Birmingham area.

£ million

Year	Gross HCHS capital expenditure (cash)	Gross HCHS capital expenditure (real terms[1])	Capital expenditure within the Birmingham area (cash)	Capital expenditure within the Birmingham area (real terms)
1973–74	265	1,754	n/a	n/a
1977–78	353	1,207	n/a	n/a
1982–83	778	1,475	n/a	m/a
1987–88	1,112	1,676	n/a	n/a
1992–93	1,815	2,002	n/a	n/a
1993–94	1,783	1,911	93	100
1994–95	2,049	2,163	58	61
1995–96	1,996	2,052	76	78
1996–97	1,683	1,683	65	65

[1] A consistent run of figures for HCHS Capital Expenditure for the period 1972–73 to 1977–78 is not available.
1. Figures for capital expenditure within the Birmingham area are taken from NHS Executive Regional Office records and are not directly comparable with the England figures. Figures prior to 1993–94 are not readily available.
2. Real terms figures have been calculated using the GDP deflator of 2 July 1997.

In addition the Private Finance Initiative has contributed an estimated further £55 million in each of the years 1995–96 and 1996–97. There are no completed PFI deals in the Birmingham local authority area.

National Blood Service

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the redundancy and pensions costs of personnel taking redundancy or early retirement from the National Blood Service have been since 1 April 1995, *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each zone. [14457]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is given in the table.

	£000
London and South East zone	1,372
Midlands and South West zone	987
Northern zone	1,067
Total	3,426

The total costs, including the full lifetime costs of early retirement according to National Health Service Accounting Treatment, will be £5.694 million.

Social Services (Winter Funding)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list for each Social Services Department his estimate of the additional funding which will be made available this winter; [14592]

(2) if he will list by health authority the dates at which the social services departments within each authority were invited to make applications for additional funding to assist with managing pressures over this winter, indicating the deadlines they were given for completing their funding applications. [14597]

Mr. Boateng: An additional £300 million has been made available for the health service in the United Kingdom this winter. Details of the allocations process in

England were set out in Executive Letter EL(97)64, copies of which have been placed in the Library. This letter asked health authorities to draw up plans for using the additional resources to improve services, in consultation with trusts, general practitioners and social services departments, by 31 October. These plans were to be agreed by the regional offices of the National Health Service Executive by 7 November. Details of the allocations to health authorities will be made public once they are available.

National Care Council

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the Rowntree Commission's proposals for a National Care Council. [14589]

Mr. Boateng: The Rowntree report is a significant and thoughtful contribution to the debate about long-term care arrangements, and its proposals will no doubt be looked at carefully in the context of the Government's intention to take forward their programme of work in this area.

Hospital and Community Health Services

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list for each health authority *(a)* the integrated allocation for hospital and community health services and *(b)* the funding per capita for (i) 1996–97 and (ii) 1997–98. [14600]

Mr. Milburn: A table detailing the information requested has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what interim weighting was used for community health services for the 1997–98 integrated allocation for hospital and community health services. [14599]

Mr. Milburn: An interim needs weighting was introduced into the main weighted capitation formula in 1997–98. This formula is used to inform general allocations to health authorities.

The needs weighting took the form of a number of indices which reflect the specific pattern of need for community health services, based on indicators of health and socioeconomic status from the Census and other sources.

Full details are given in the booklet "HCHS Revenue Resource Allocation to Health Authorities: Weighted Capitation Formulas", copies of which are available in the Library.

Adhesive Arachnoiditis

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of state for Health for what reasons the Department of Health was not represented at the conference held in London in 1995 by Dr. Burton on the subject of adhesive arachnoiditis. [14602]

Ms Jowell: The Chief Medical Officer was unable to attend this conference because of previous commitments. His deputy was unable to attend the conference at short notice.

NHS Pay Awards

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* NHS trusts in the Northern and Yorkshire region, *(b)* community trusts nationally and *(c)* trusts nationally have reached agreement with their staff over the local element of the national NHS pay awards for 1996–97; and what percentage of (i) trusts and (ii) NHS staff are covered by these agreements in each case. [14236]

Mr. Milburn: We are not aware of any ongoing negotiations on the local element of the National Health Service Pay award for 1996–97.

Nottingham Health Authority

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage level of capitation funding the Nottingham health authority has received for each of the last five years; and what is the planned figure for 1997–98. [14419]

Mr. Milburn: The general allocations for Nottingham Health Authority for 1993–94 to 1998–99 and the percentage of the health authority's weighted capitation target they represent are shown in the attached table.

In 1998–99 formula changes have increased Nottingham Health Authority's weighted capitation target. As a result they have received 2.39 per cent. real terms growth. This is the eleventh highest real terms growth in percentage terms of all health authorities in England.

Nottingham Health Authority

Year	*General allocation (£ million)*	*Weighted capitation target (per cent.)*
1998–99	286.6	96.5
1997–98	272.2	97.6
1996–97	262.2	97.4
1995–96	253.4	96.7
1994–95	232.2	99.9
1993–94	224.6	101.4

The figures are not directly comparable year-on-year because of the following changes to the way allocations have been made:

1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96—these figures were collected centrally and adjusted to allow for the different ways in which the regional health authorities made allocations to district health authorities.

Since 1996–97 General Allocations have been made direct to health authorities.

Mentally Ill Patients

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to protect mentally ill patients from harassment and intimidation in their communities. [14563]

Mr. Boateng: The appropriate statutory authorities have a responsibility to ensure that mentally ill patients are cared for in the community in a safe and therapeutic environment. Clearly, mental health services need to proceed with sensitivity and adopt an informative, open approach in handling their [illegible]s for community developments. However, we recognise that the stigmatisation of mental illness is a serious problem. We therefore attach great importance to the need to

increase knowledge and understanding about mental health among the general public, thereby promoting a positive image of mental health and combatting stigma. Through our Impact Mental Illness Public Information Strategy, we are working closely with the voluntary sector, the media and other groups to take forward such work.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons refugees and asylum seekers are not included in the formula for allocating funding to individual health authorities, with specific reference to health authorities in London; and if he will amend the funding formula to take account of the health needs of refugees and asylum seekers. [14622]

Mr. Milburn: Refugees and asylum seekers are already included in the population data which are used in the weighted capitation formula to allocate funds to health authorities.

We are however asking the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation (ACRA) to look at all aspects of population statistics used for resource allocation. ACRA will also consider whether there are any extra unavoidable costs associated with ethnicity.

Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 3 November, *Official Report,* columns *76-77* (1) if one of the two vacant posts of non-executive director only required specific skills; and if he will make a statement; [15003]

(2) how many of the shortlisted applicants for the post of non-executive director of the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust had audit skills; [15004]

(3) how many candidates shortlisted for interviews for the post of non-executive director at the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust had theappropriate skills and capacity to chair the Trust's Audit Committee and met the requirements of the job description; [15007]

(4) for what reasons candidates for interview were not advised of detailed job descriptions relating to the need to have appropriate skills and to be able to chair the Trust's Audit Committee. [15005]

Mr. Milburn: The interview panel were looking for one candidate capable of chairing the trust's audit committee, and another to have responsibility for patient relations and act as a complaints convenor. Four of the eleven shortlisted applicants, ten of whom were subsequently interviewed by the panel, were judged to have the appropriate skills to chair the audit committee. All applicants received the standard job description for non-executive directors which states that non-executives may be asked to sit on the audit committee or oversee the trust's response to complaints from the public. The local advertisement for the vacancies also made it clear that one of those appointed would be expected to chair the audit committee.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 3 November, *Official Report,* columns *76–77,* by whom and on what basis were *(a)* Mr. Ian MacDonald, *(b)* Mr. Ian Robertson and *(c)* Mr. Geoff Jennings selected to serve on the selection/interviewing panel for the vacant non-executive director's post at the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust. [15006]

Mr. Milburn: The interview panel was recommended by the current chairman of the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals National Health Service Trust and approved by the National Health Service Executive Regional Office.

NHS Funding

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the annual change in funding for the national health service for each year from 1979–80 to 1998–99 in *(a)* cash terms, *(b)* 1996–97 prices and *(c)* percentage real terms; and if he will make a statement. [14751]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is set out in the attached table.

Real growth in National Health Service total expenditure (England)

Year[1]	*Gross expenditure*			*Net expenditure*		
	Cash growth (£ million)	*Real growth*[2] *(1996–97 prices) (£ million)*	*Real growth*[2] *(per cent.)*	*Cash growth (£ million)*	*Real growth*[2] *(1996–97 prices) (£ million)*	*Real growth*[2] *(per cent.)*
1979–80	1,230	368	1.8	1,174	332	1.7
1980–81	2,348	2,065	10.1	2,253	1,979	10.1
1981–82	1,226	505	2.2	1,154	437	2.0
1982–83	1,024	412	1.8	965	364	1.7
1983–84	761	341	1.5	675	230	1.0
1984–85	988	567	2.4	913	492	2.2
1985–86	809	59	0.2	769	56	0.2
1986–87	1,123	1,068	4.4	997	903	3.9
1987–88	1,608	1,138	4.5	1,495	1,036	4.3
1988–89	1,974	1,121	4.2	1,745	890	3.5
1989–90	1,516	193	0.7	1,442	206	0.8
1990–91	2,522	1,016	3.6	2,471	1,078	4.1
1991–92	3,132	1,864	6.4	3,027	1,841	6.7

Real growth in National Health Service total expenditure (England)

Year[1]	Gross expenditure Cash growth (£ million)	Gross expenditure Real growth[2] (1996–97 prices) (£ million)	Gross expenditure Real growth[2] (per cent.)	Net expenditure Cash growth (£ million)	Net expenditure Real growth[2] (1996–97 prices) (£ million)	Net expenditure Real growth[2] (per cent.)
1992–93	2,585	1,611	5.2	2,617	1,712	5.9
1993–94	1,022	181	0.6	971	170	0.6
1994–95	1,580	1,184	3.6	1,629	1,259	4.1
1995–96	1,500	639	1.9	1,388	564	1.7
1996–97	1,149	224	0.7	1,086	203	0.6
1997–98[3]	1,552	584	1.7	1,541	615	1.9
1998–99[4]	1,419	402	1.1	1,529	547	1.6

[1] 1978–79 to 1996–97 are outturn figures, 1997–98 is forecast outturn and 1998–99 is planned expenditure.
[2] Using GDP deflator of 2 July 1997.
[3] Forecast outturn for 1997–98 includes the extra resources announced for this winter on 14 October.
[4] Planned expenditure for 1998–99 includes the extra £1 billion announced at the 2 July Budget.

Suicides

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary for Health what action he is taking to reduce the incidence of suicide. [14564]

Mr. Boateng: Latest figures show an encouraging downward trend in the overall suicide rate—9.8 per cent. since 1990 (based on a three-year average) but there is no room for complacency. As there is no single reason why people take their own lives, action needs to be taken on a number of fronts. Measures include: reducing access to means, for example, we recently announced restrictions on paracetamol and aspirin pack sizes and improvements in warnings about the effect of overdose; increasing public awareness and understanding about mental illness; focusing on high risk groups, for example, the development of a telephone helpline for young men; educating health and social care professionals about depression; audit of serious incidents and the dissemination of findings; and improving primary and secondary mental health services.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14951]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* The Department has no record of placing any contracts with Monitor Consultancy in the period 1 April 1992 to the present time. Information about the period 1 April 1990 to 31 March 1992 is not readily available and can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Train Passengers

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, if he will list the percentage of passengers in excess of capacity carried by each train operating company during *(a)* the morning peak hours and *(b)* the evening peak hours and the number of standing passengers that this represents in each case; and if he will make a statement. [13051]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Figures for 1995 and 1996 are in the table. The trend shows that the number of peak passengers into and out of London has increased but the levels of crowding have reduced. Certain ScotRail services are also subject to Passengers in Excess of Capacity (PIXC) monitoring, but figures are not yet available.

Passengers in excess of capacity: London terminals

	1995 AM	1996 AM	Change	1995 PM	1996 PM	Change	1995 total	1996 total	Change
Chiltern (per cent.)	5.5	0.2	–5.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0	0.1	–2.9
Connex South Central									
South London (Inner) (per cent.)	2.2	3.2	1.0	2.2	1.2	–1.0	2.2	2.3	0.1
Sussex Coast (Outer) (per cent.)	2.2	5.8	3.6	2.5	2.2	–0.3	2.3	4.1	1.8
Total (per cent.)	2.2	4.0	1.8	2.3	1.6	–0.7	2.2	2.9	0.7
Connex South Eastern									
Kent Link (Inner) (per cent.)	2.2	2.2	0.0	0.1	0.3	0.2	1.2	1.3	0.1
Kent Coast (Outer) (per cent.)	3.8	2.9	–0.9	0.7	2.5	1.8	2.2	2.7	0.5
Total (per cent.)	2.5	2.3	–0.2	0.3	0.9	0.6	1.5	1.7	0.2
Great Eastern									
Inner (per cent.)	5.2	5.6	0.4	1.0	1.9	0.9	3.2	3.8	0.6
Outer (per cent.)	2.5	2.8	0.3	2.0	1.5	–0.5	2.2	2.2	0.0
Total (per cent.)	3.7	4.1	0.4	1.6	1.7	0.1	2.7	2.9	0.2

Passengers in excess of capacity: London terminals

	1995 AM	1996 AM	Change	1995 PM	1996 PM	Change	1995 total	1996 total	Change
London, Tilbury and Southend (per cent.)	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.5	0.3
North London									
Watford Local (Inner) (per cent.)	0.0	2.1	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3	1.3
Northampton (Outer) (per cent.)	0.6	1.3	0.7	0.0	1.3	1.3	0.3	1.3	1.0
Total (per cent.)	0.5	1.4	0.9	0.0	1.1	1.1	0.3	1.3	1.0
South West Trains									
Inner (per cent.)	7.1	3.4	–3.7	0.3	1.2	0.9	4.2	2.4	–1.8
Outer (per cent.)	3.5	2.2	–1.3	0.2	0.3	0.1	1.9	1.3	–0.6
Total (per cent.)	5.9	3.0	–2.9	0.3	0.9	0.6	3.4	2.0	–1.4
Thames (per cent.)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	–0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Thameslink									
Inner (NSC) (per cent.)	7.5	4.6	–2.9	0.0	6.4	6.4	4.3	5.5	1.2
Outer (North/South) (per cent.)	1.6	1.4	–0.2	3.0	2.1	–0.9	2.3	1.7	–0.6
Total (per cent.)	2.6	2.0	–0.6	2.6	2.9	0.3	2.6	2.4	–0.2
West Anglia and Great Northern									
Inner (per cent.)	4.8	1.7	–3.1	2.3	0.4	–1.9	3.6	1.1	–2.5
Outer (per cent.)	0.1	0.5	0.4	0.9	2.1	1.2	0.5	1.3	0.8
Total (per cent.)	2.7	1.1	–1.6	1.6	1.3	–0.3	2.2	1.2	–1.0
London PIXC total (per cent.)	3.0	2.6	–0.4	1.0	1.2	0.2	2.1	1.9	–0.2
Passenger numbers	382,244	387,488	5,244	328,836	336,972	8,136	711,080	724,460	13,380
Passenger numbers (per cent.)	100	101.37	1.37	100	102.47	2.47	100	101.88	1.88
Number of passengers in excess of capacity	11,532	9,948	–1,584	3,222	3,962	740	14,754	13,910	–844

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pollution (South-East Asia)

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department has taken in respect of the recent pollution incident in the Malaysian Peninsula, Borneo and Sumatra. [15047]

Mr. Foulkes: We reacted swiftly to the environmental emergency in South East Asia with a grant of £62,066 to the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs to provide relief goods to those affected. We offered to send aircraft with infra-red reconnaissance capability to pin-point the location of fires but these were no longer required. We have also provided two experts to support the United Nations' disaster assessment and co-ordination role and a fire-fighting and logistics expert to lead the Technical Co-ordination Group established to co-ordinate international assistance for the provision of ground fire-fighting equipment and training.

UNESCO

Mr. Faber: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development from where savings have been found in her Department's budget to fund membership of UNESCO. [14824]

Mr. Foulkes: Our contribution of £5 million for the period 1 July to 31 December 1997 has been met from DFID's in-year contingency reserve. Future annual contributions are being considered in the current resources round.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders her Department made during the summer adjournment. [14383]

Mr. Foulkes: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 5 November, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Windward Islands

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what technical assistance has been provided to St. Lucia, Dominica and Grenada to help diversify their economies; and if he will make a statement. [14995]

Mr. Foulkes: Current UK Technical Assistance aims to strengthen exportable food crop research, macro economic policy and public sector development. This

complements substantial EC resources, to which Britain contributes, to promote agricultural and broader economic diversification initiatives in these islands.

Montserrat

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the UK's aid to Montserrat. [14989]

Mr. Foulkes: Since the start of the volcanic crisis some £45.8 million of emergency aid, development assistance and budgetary aid has been committed by Her Majesty's Government to the needs of Montserrat. We are currently working with the Government of Montserrat to develop a sustainable development plan for the north of the island and doing all we can to improve the services provided by Government of Montserrat for the people and the Island. We are also providing assistance to those who wish to leave Montserrat.

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

E-Mail

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will place in the Library a list of the e-mail addresses of all Ministers; and if he will make a statement on whether Ministers are accessible by e-mail. [13767]

Dr. David Clark: A list of Ministers' e-mail addresses is not held centrally. However, if Ministers would like a central list set up then I would be happy to take this forward. Individual departments are responsible for providing their Ministers with e-mail addresses.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for maximising *(a)* employment levels and *(b)* employability across the European Union. [14421]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Unemployment is Europe's most acute problem. A special European Council (the "Jobs Summit") is to take place in Luxembourg on 20/21 of this month, and my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary will attend for the UK. The main challenge for the Jobs Summit is to produce agreement on the areas where Member States should be taking measures to tackle unemployment and to promote a high and sustainable level of employment. The Summit will discuss draft Employment Guidelines, which are required under the provisions of the Amsterdam Treaty. The Guidelines are central to the efforts of Member States and the EU in the field of employment. We shall want the agreed Guidelines to reflect the paramount importance of employability and job creation. The Commission's draft, published on 1 October, provides a good basis for discussion in it's key themes of adaptability, employability, entrepreneurship, and equal opportunities. We shall want the Summit to commit Member States to take positive action which can be realised during our Presidency and carried forward in the Presidencies that follow.

The UK Presidency of the Council in the first half of next year gives us a real opportunity to shift the European agenda in a new direction. Our intention is for the Presidency in the Social Affairs and Education fields to have employability as a key, shared theme. There will be a joint informal Council meeting in London next March of next year, formal Councils later in the Presidency and a range of key conferences. Education and Social Affairs Ministers across Europe will be working together and we will be looking to engage many people in our discussions and in taking work forward.

The Presidency will encompass work on lifelong learning and on innovative ways of tackling unemployment and combating social exclusion. Following the Jobs Summit we intend to set the framework for the Community's new education and training programmes and to focus on the role of the member states and the Community in improving skill levels. During our Presidency we intend to shift the European agenda decisively and to make a concrete start in giving people the skills and adaptability needed for successful careers in the flexible labour markets which are a key part of ensuring the competitiveness of Europe.

Welfare to Work

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he will take to ensure that black and Asian young people benefit from the Government's welfare to work proposals. [14402]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Government are committed to ensuring that the New Deal will actively promote equality of opportunity for young people of all ethnic and racial groups. Delivery arrangements for each element of the programme—the Gateway, the four options and follow-through support—will promote racial equality and are based on detailed consideration of how best to deliver provision for young people from ethnic minorities, including consultation with the Commission for Racial Equality and encouragement to Race Equality Councils to be involved in local arrangements. Further details of the arrangements particularly relating to ethnic minority participants are set out in the New Deal Design document which has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what sanctions he proposes to impose on those aged under 25 years who are unemployed who refuse to take up any of the options offered to them under the Welfare to Work scheme. [14683]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* We intend that young people who are judged by an Adjudication Officer to have refused a New Deal place without good cause will lose their Jobseeker's Allowance for two weeks. If they refuse a further offer at any time in the following twelve months they will lose JSA for four weeks.

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14380]

Dr. Howells: The following items of secondary legislation were made during the period in question:

The Education (School Leaving Date) Order 1997;

The Education (School Inspection) Regulations 1997;

The Education (Fees and Awards) Regulations 1997;

The Education (Grants) (Music, Ballet and Choir Schools) (Amendment) Regulations 1997;

The Education (Assisted Places) Regulations 1997;

The Education (Assisted Places) (Incidental Expenses) Regulations 1997;

The Nursery Education (Amendment) Regulations 1997;

The Nursery Education (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1997;

The Education (School Performance Information) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 1997;

The Education (School Performance Information) (England) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1997;

The Education (London Residuary Body) (Suspense Account Properties) Order 1997;

The Education (Grants for Education Support and Training) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 1997;

The Education (Further Education Institutions Information) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 1997;

The Education (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for Wales) (Transfer of Property and Designation of Staff) Order 1997;

The Education (Grant-Maintained Special Schools) (Amendment) Regulations 1997;

The Education (National Curriculum) (Assessment Arrangements for Key Stages 1, 2 and 3) (England) (Amendment) Order 1997;

The Education (Funding for Teacher Training) (Designation) (No. 3) Order 1997;

The Education (Individual Performance Information) (Prescribed Bodies and Persons) Regulations 1997.

No other delegated legislation or deregulation orders were made.

Discretionary Grants

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his Department's estimate of the number of applicants for discretionary grants who have been refused by their local education authority in each of the last five years. [14561]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The information requested is not available centrally.

Student Loans

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, what is his Department's estimate of the number of graduates who *(a)* earn too little to repay loans and *(b)* have defaulted on repayment; and if he will make a statement. [14560]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* At 31 March 1997, *(a)* 314,378 (49 per cent.) borrowers due to repay were deferring repayment because their income was below 85 per cent. of national average earnings and *(b)* 34,109 (9.3 per cent.) borrowers due to repay but not in deferment were in default.

Home Education

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children are currently being educated at home. [14921]

Ms Estelle Morris: In January 1997 local education authorities in England were providing home tuition to 10,800 children under their duty to arrange suitable education for pupils who cannot attend school. It has been estimated that a further 10,000 children are educated outside the school system, under arrangements made by their parents.

School Places

Mr. Norris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the allocation of school places which prevents a local education authority giving children from its own area priority in admissions to its own schools, when pupils from other authorities live closer to the school. [14758]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have no plans to reverse the "Greenwich judgment", under which LEAs may not give preference to children living in their administrative area over children living elsewhere. We do, however, believe that there should be greater co-operation and co-ordination between neighbouring authorities, and we shall encourage this in our proposed new Code of Practice on admissions.

University Applications

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, what assessment he has made of university applications for 1997–98 and the levels of parental income of applicants compared with previous years; and if he will make a statement. [14559]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The latest information from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service indicates that, allowing for the extra Art and Design Admissions Registry applicants new to the UCAS scheme for 1997–98, the number of home and overseas accepted applicants is some 7 to 8 per cent. higher in 1997–98, than in the previous years. Information on the levels of parental income of applicants is not centrally available; nor have we yet received local authorities' annual returns showing the numbers of award-holding students for 1997–98 and the levels of assessed parental contributions, which reflect their income.

Overseas Students

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary for Education and Employment, how many students who did not hold a British passport enrolled at United Kingdom universities from *(a)* other EU countries and *(b)* South East Asia for each of the last five years; and what are the projected enrolment figures for (i) the current academic year and (ii) the next two academic years. [14695]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The available data based on domicile rather than passport nationality are given in the table.

Figures for 1997–98 are not yet available.

Higher education full-time and part-time student enrolments in Great Britain

Academic year	EU domicile	South East Asia domicile
1992–93	36,128	29,110
1993–94	43,850	35,210
1994–95	61,090	42,487
1995–96	76,794	49,384
1996–97	79,904	46,475

The Department's forecasts for EU students are confined to those students who receive mandatory awards to cover the cost of their tuition fees. The Department's spending plans allow for a 1 per cent. per annum increase in these numbers. The Department does not make forecasts of the numbers of students from South East Asia who choose to study HE in the UK.

Higher Education Grants

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, what is his estimate of the annual cost of returning to the full grant system for higher education. [14562]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The cost of returning to a full grant system would be about £29 million in academic year 1998–99 and £180 million in 1999–2000, at 1997–98 prices. This assumes that both student numbers and the levels of parental contribution remain unchanged; that the new arrangements would be introduced for all students; and that the existing loan entitlement would be replaced by a means-tested grant. The savings generated by the new higher education funding arrangements we have announced would also be foregone.

Grammar Schools

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how the ballots of parents on the future of grammar schools will be triggered; [14938]

(2) if a minimum turnout threshold will be set for ballots on the future of grammar schools; [14966]

(3) how eligible parents will be defined in respect of ballots on the future of grammar schools. [14968]

Mr. Byers: The Department issued on 1 August a consultation letter setting out the principles of the government's approach in relation to ballots of parents on future admission arrangements for grammar schools, and inviting views on the issues arising and the procedures which might be adopted. The letter made clear that parental ballots will be triggered only where a petition seeking a ballot has been put forward by local parents. It sought views on which parents should be eligible to vote in ballots, and on the mechanism for conducting ballots. We have received some 1,100 responses to the consultation letter. These are currently being analysed. We shall announce as soon as possible our conclusions on the best way of carrying our proposals forward.

Teachers

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, how many teachers other than those in further or higher education or independent schools *(a)* were made redundant and *(b)* did not have their contracts renewed for each month from September 1996 to September 1997. [14694]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The information requested is not available.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his Answer of 29 October, *Official Report*, column *819*, what proportion of teachers, other than those in further and higher education or independent schools, who retired under the age of 60 years in the period October 1996 to September 1997 retired *(a)* on the grounds of (i) ill-health, (ii) efficiency or (iii) redundancy and *(b)* aged (1) under 30, (2) 30 to 34, (3) 35 to 39, (4) 40 to 44, (5) 45 to 49, (6) 50 to 54 and (7) 55 to 59 years. [14702]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* There were 19,310 retirements aged under 60 from the maintained schools sector in England and Wales between October 1996 and September 1997 on the grounds of ill-health, efficiency or redundancy. The number of retirements is provisional. The percentage breakdown by age group and type of retirement is given below.

Percentages

Age at retirement	Ill-health[1]	Premature		Total retirements
		Redundancy	Efficiency	
Under 30	—	n/a	n/a	—
30 to 34	—	n/a	n/a	—
35 to 39	1	n/a	n/a	1
40 to 44	2	n/a	n/a	2
45 to 49	6	n/a	n/a	6
50 to 54	9	9	41	59
55 to 59	5	4	23	32
All ages	23	14	63	100

— = less than 0.5 per cent.
n/a = not applicable.
[1] Provisional. Figures are likely to change because of late notifications.

Tennis

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of schools and sixth-form colleges which have staff qualified to provide tuition in tennis. [15146]

Ms Estelle Morris: This information is not collected by the Department.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of schools and sixth-form colleges which provide tuition in tennis, indicating the number of children receiving such tuition. [15145]

Ms Estelle Morris: None. This information is not collected or held centrally.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14945]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* There is no record of the Department having entered into any contract with Monitor Consultancy nor have any discussions been held with such a company.

University Students

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the ratio of undergraduate students to teaching staff at *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge, *(c)* Durham and *(d)* all universities in England and Wales. [14629]

Dr. Howells: The latest available information which relates to 1993–94 and covers all students (undergraduates and postgraduates) in all higher education institutions in England shows a student: staff ratio of 16.5.

Because of changes in data sources in 1994–95 more recent figures have not so far been published. It is intended that the next Departmental Annual Report due to be published in March 1998 will contain more up to date figures.

Student:staff ratios for individual institutions are not compiled by the Department. Figures for former University Funding Council universities were published up to 1993–94, by cost centre, in the University Management Statistics and Performance Indicators in the UK publication.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many mature students are currently studying at *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge and *(c)* Durham Universities; if he will express that figure as a percentage of the total undergraduate student body of each university; and what is the average for all British universities. [14627]

Dr. Howells: The information is given in the following table:

Mature[1] home and overseas undergraduates in higher education 1996–97

University	Mature undergraduates (thousands)		Percentage of all undergraduates	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
Oxford	2.7	2.7	24	100
Cambridge	3.0	2.0	28	99
Durham	2.0	0.6	26	93
All higher education institutions in the UK[2]	446.3	346.4	45	97

[1] Those aged 21 and over in the current academic year. [2] Including the Open University.

Oxford, Cambridge and Durham Colleges

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the cost to his Department arising from the duplication of administrative functions at the constituent colleges of *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge and *(c)* Durham universities. [14628]

Dr. Howells: The organisation of their administrative functions is a matter for the colleges concerned, having regard to the resources available to them. The Department does not have information about the cost of those functions, but has asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England to review college fees. We expect soon to receive the Council's advice on the mechanisms for setting future funding for universities and colleges at Oxford and Cambridge and on any implications for the three independent colleges at Durham, which also receive funding through reimbursement of college fees.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will establish the total assets of each constituent college of *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge and *(c)* Durham universities. [14625]

Dr. Howells: The constituent colleges of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham universities are private sector institutions. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 specifically debars Government, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England, from having regard to private income in distributing public funds.

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of his Department's budget in each of the last five years went towards college fees for undergraduates studying at colleges within *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge and *(c)* Durham universities. [14623]

Dr. Howells: In 1997–98 the net cost of college fees (taking account of the amount of grant clawed back in compensation from Oxford and Cambridge universities by the Funding Council) was £19 million for Oxford, £17 million for Cambridge and £0.6 million for Durham, representing just under 1 per cent. of the Department's budget of £4.4 billion for higher education institutions. The proportion was similar in previous years.

Undergraduates (Private School Background)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of the last five years' undergraduate intake at *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge and *(c)* Durham universities were from the private school sector. [14624]

Dr. Howells: The information is not available in the form requested. The latest information available shows that 52 per cent. of students accepted for entry to undergraduate courses at Oxford in Autumn 1996 came from private schools as did 48 per cent. of Cambridge's intake. Comparable information is not available for Durham.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the budget for 1997–98 for each grant-maintained school in England and Wales as funded by the Funding Agency for Schools. [14669]

Mr. Byers: The calculation of grants to individual grant-maintained schools in England is a matter for the Funding Agency for Schools. I have therefore written to Sir Anthony Tippet, Chairman of the Funding Agency, to ask him to provide the figures requested. Responsibility for education in Wales is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

DEFENCE

Racism

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to combat racism in the armed forces. [14699]

Dr. Reid: As my right hon: Friend the Secretary of State and I have made clear on a number of occasions, it is our aim fully to embrace diversity in the Armed Forces and that they should better reflect the society they defend. We are determined both to provide a working environment that is free from any form of racial harassment or discrimination and to encourage more people from the ethnic minorities to join the Armed Forces. It has been made absolutely clear to all personnel, from all three Services, that we will not tolerate racism in the Armed forces and will be unremitting in our efforts to remove any racist attitudes, racially discriminatory practice, behaviour or language.

Changes in attitudes within the Services and perceptions outside will, of course, take time, but we are determined to make real progress in this area. The recent public launch by the Chief of the General Staff of the Army's revised Equal Opportunities Directive gave an unequivocal commitment to upholding the principle of Equality of Opportunity for all Army personnel.

Examples of the initiatives being pursued by the Army include:

- a booklet setting out a revised, and greatly simplified, complaints procedure designed to assist those exposed to harassment/discrimination, which will be issued to every soldier. The Naval Service and RAF plan to have similar booklets.
- a confidential support helpline service, effective from 1 December, which will be outside the chain of command;
- an independent Investigation Team to investigate complaints of harassment/discrimination;
- a new Ethnic Minorities Recruiting Team to help increase proportions of ethnic minorities serving.

The Chiefs of Staff in the Naval Service and the RAF are equally committed to ensuring equality of opportunity in their respective Services, a commitment exemplified by the success of The Royal Navy in being shortlisted by the British Diversity panel in recognition of its efforts to improve equal opportunities.

All three Services have introduced many initiatives to help combat and eliminate all forms of racism in, and to improve ethnic recruiting to the Armed Forces. Each Service has issued Equal Opportunities Directives and leaflets, which are issued to all servicing and new personnel, spelling out clearly what equal opportunities means, harassment and complaints procedures and their rights and responsibilities. These are supported by individual Service Equal Opportunities Action Plans which allow us to monitor our policies and practice to ensure there is no discrimination. They will also ensure that awareness of both ethnic origin and gender issues are considered when forming new policy and initiatives.

Each of the Services provide equal opportunities training for all new entrants, officers and NCOs promotion and management courses, Commanding Officers, recruiters and equal opportunities advisers. We are looking at what more might be done on a tri-Service basis.

The Chief of Defence Staff, and the individual Service Chiefs have accepted the CRE's Leadership Challenge and have given their personal commitment to promote racial equality, together with taking practical steps to promote change within their own Services. In addition, each of the Services is a member of the Race for Opportunity scheme.

UFOs

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's investigations into alleged sightings of unidentified flying objects intruding into British air space. [14907]

Mr. Spellar: My Department examines any reports of "unexplained" aerial sightings that are sent to us solely to establish whether what was seen might have some defence significance, namely, whether there was any evidence that the UK Air Defence Region might have been breached by hostile or unauthorised foreign military activity. Unless there is evidence of a potential military threat, and to date no "unidentified flying object" sighting has revealed such evidence, we do not attempt to identify the precise nature of each reported incident.

RAF Menwith Hill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the information collected at RAF Menwith Hill is available to the British Security Services. [14513]

Dr. Reid: I am withholding information on the operations of the intelligence and security agencies under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information on the grounds of national security.

Trident

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons consideration of the Trident system has been excluded from the defence review. [15026]

Mr. George Robertson: The retention of Trident was a specific commitment in the Government's election manifesto. The review is however examining all aspects of our deterrence requirements to ensure they reflect changing strategic circumstances. The Government will also press for multi-lateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what strategic factors underlay his decisions to spend an extra £100 million on the Trident system. [15002]

Mr. George Robertson: The recent decision on a long standing element of the nearly completed Trident procurement programme is in line with the Government's manifesto commitment to retain Trident to provide a minimum credible nuclear deterrent.

Hunting

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria his Department has set for the registration of packs of fox hounds which hunt on their land; if such packs must also be recognised by the Master of Fox Hounds Association; and if he will make a statement. [14442]

Mr. Spellar: Foxhunting on the Defence Estate is regulated by the licensing of hunts which are officially recognised and accepted by the Committee of the Master of Foxhounds Association. The licence is issued to a hunt representative who must be a member of the Master of Foxhounds Association.

The registration of packs of foxhounds in the foxhound kennel stud book is a matter for the Master of the Hunt.

CABINET OFFICE

Millennium Dome

28. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Minister without Portfolio what will be the total cost of constructing the millennium dome at Greenwich. [13455]

Mr. Mandelson: The overall cash budget for the Millennium Experience and associated national programme is £758 million. For that the Nation will get: the catalyst for the long-term physical and economic regeneration of a site that has lain derelict for over 20 years; the most famous new building of the year 2000; an Experience that will be the most original and inspiring Millennium event anywhere in the world; and a National Programme of events and activities that will extend right across the country.

29. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister without Portfolio what monitoring he has undertaken of employees contracted to work on the dome. [13456]

Mr. Mandelson: It is for the individual contractors to monitor their own employees. NMEC's work contracts meet all relevant legal requirements.

Contracts also reflect best practice in matters such as Considerate Contractor Scheme. All aspects of the contracts are regularly monitored by the company to ensure compliance.

30. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Minister without Portfolio what plans he has to move the millennium dome from Greenwich in 2001. [13457]

Mr. Mandelson: The Government are currently considering a range of possible, self-financing, uses for the Millennium Experience Dome at Greenwich or possibly elsewhere after 2000.

31. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Minister without Portfolio how long the millennium experience will be maintained at Greenwich. [13458]

Mr. Mandelson: The Experience will, as presently planned, run on the Greenwich site for 367 days from 31 December 1999 to 31 December 2000.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio, pursuant to his answer of 28 July, *Official Report*, column *25*, for what reasons he is unable to list the journeys he has undertaken since 2 May at public expense. [14509]

Mr. Mandelson: I have nothing to add to the reply that I gave on 28 July, *Official Report*, column *25*.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio, pursuant to his answer of 31 July, *Official Report*, column *426*, for what reasons he does not propose to disclose details of conversations, meetings or other engagements undertaken in pursuance of his duties as Minister without Portfolio. [14510]

Mr. Mandelson: Even if it were possible to keep universally detailed records of the kind the hon. Member appears to envisage, the cost of so doing would be quite disproportionate.

Media Reporting

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will list the occasions since 2 May on which he or persons within his Office have complained to the media about the reporting of the Government's activities. [14516]

Mr. Mandelson: I have nothing to add to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) on 25 June, *Official Report*, column *524*.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Welfare-to-Work Programme

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much of the £195 million mentioned in her Department's press release of 29 October will be made available exclusively for the needs of disabled people within the welfare-to-work programme. [14680]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 November]:* The Government strongly believe that, for people of working age, work is the best form of welfare. We are committed to improving opportunities for sick and disabled people to work, up to £195 million has been set aside from the Windfall Tax to fund this important programme.

Many people with disabilities or long-term health problems want to work and the aim of the Welfare to Work programme is to allow them to do so. We wish to develop ways to give each sick and disabled person the advice, help and support they need to achieve their aspirations and to move towards financial independence.

The money set aside from the Windfall Tax will be used to actively explore a range of approaches, covering various illnesses and disabilities, to identify and pursue

the best ways to help people with disabilities and long-term health problems move into work or remain in work.

Mr. Steve Reardon

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if she will publish the level of salary paid to Government information officers on the same grade as Mr. Steve Reardon; and what plans she has for a successor to be paid more; [15060]

(2) for what reasons Mr. Steve Reardon ceased to work as Director of Information at her Department on 16 September; [15061]

(3) if she requested Mr. Steve Reardon to leave his post; and if she will make a statement; [15062]

(4) if she is seeking a replacement to the Director of Information at her Department from outside the Civil Service; and what is the maximum salary that her Department is prepared to pay an individual accepting that post or a post to replace Mr. Reardon; [15063]

(5) if she will list the advertisements and internal memoranda relating to the vacancy to replace Mr. Reardon at her Department; and if she will publish the job description and duties of the post; [15064]

(6) if the position of Director of Information at her Department as it existed up to 16 September has been abolished; and if she will make a statement; [15065]

(7) if the successor to Mr. Steve Reardon at her Department will be of the same grade as Mr. Reardon; [15066]

(8) if she will publish the job description and duties of the Director of Information at her Department prior to 16 September. [15067]

Ms Harman: The former Director of Information at the DSS left his post on 16 September. I did not request him to leave; he stepped aside after agreeing with the Department the need for a different style and approach in his Directorate. An advertisement for a new Director of Information was placed in *The Guardian* newspaper on 20 October and, shortly afterwards, was circulated to members of the Government Information Service. The job is open to people with the appropriate skills and experience whether or not they are existing civil servants.

The level of responsibility, the pay range and duties of the post are unaltered. It is a Senior Civil Service post and the appropriate remuneration lies in the range £52,020 to £86,700 per annum. The job description is as follows:

> "The Director of Information is Press Secretary to the Secretary of State for Social Security and is responsible for advice to the Department on media handling and presentation across the full range of its responsibilities, including supporting the Secretary of State in her role as Minister for Women.
>
> The Director is Head of Profession for all Government Information Service staff with the department and provides advice to Agency Chief Executives on issues such as information standards, staff recruitment and propriety. He/she manages a team of around 40 professional and administrative staff and is responsible for expenditure of around £5 million a year.
>
> The postholder reports to the Head of Policy Group and is directly accountable to the Secretary of State".

The advertisement offers a salary of up to £70,000 per annum depending upon the experience of the successful candidate. The pay of other senior Information Officers is a matter for individual departments but is determined in the same way and by reference to rules laid down for appointments to the Senior Civil Service.

The selection of a new Director of Information will be conducted under the Civil Service Commissioners' rules which ensure fair and open competition. The selection process will be chaired by a Commissioner.

Benefits Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much money the Government are allocating to the Benefits Fraud Inspectorate; and how much money she estimates will be saved through tighter surveillance of benefit fraud. [15179]

Mr. Denham: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) will play a vital role in driving up operational standards to maximise counter-fraud performance and minimise the risk of fraud throughout the Social Security system. This will be achieved by forward looking inspection reports with recommendations on how performance can be improved and by identifying and encouraging good practice.

Under the spending plans of the previous Government, BFI was allocated an annual running costs budget of £2 million for 1997–98. We are now considering whether this is adequate for the BFI to carry out an effective inspection programme for local authorities and DSS Agencies.

It is not possible to quantify precisely the impact of more secure systems and improvements in standards of counter-fraud activity in preventing and detecting fraud. Much will depend on the nature of the problems identified by the BFI inspections. We expect BFI, along with a range of other work, to deliver in due course permanent reductions in the amount lost to benefit fraud, although it may not be possible to isolate completely the effects of each initiative.

Press Conferences

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security in what circumstances Government press conferences are shared with pressure groups. [15173]

Mr. Field: This Department invites Pressure Groups to attend press conferences when it is appropriate.

National Insurance Contributions

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are her estimates of the yield to the Exchequer from extending *(a)* employee and *(b)* employer national insurance contributions to all taxable benefits in kind; and if she will make a statement. [14522]

Mr. Denham: It is estimated that the extension of Class 1A paid by employers to other taxable benefits at the current 10.0 per cent. rate would raise approximately £300 million. Extending Class 1 paid by both employers and employees to taxable benefits in kind, assuming that all contributions are paid at the main 10 per cent. rate, is estimated to result in revenue of around £850 million in

secondary contributions and £250 million in primary. However this would have to be offset against the loss of around £550 million Class 1A, giving a net gain of around £550 million.

We have already announced measures to bring non-cash vouchers into liability for National Insurance. We will continue to keep pay practices and the case for extending contributions to other benefits in kind under review.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is her estimate of the effects on employment of a 1 per cent. reduction in the rates of employers' national insurance contributions; and if she will make a statement. [14518]

Mr. Denham: It is not possible to produce an estimate.

The effect of changes on employers' National Insurance contributions cannot be isolated from other factors affecting the level of employment.

Appeals Backlog

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment she has made of the extent to which the backlog of appeals will be reduced by the provisions of the Social Security Bill. [15172]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Social Security Bill contains measures which will address the backlog of appeals. For example, the powers for the Commissioners to return supported appeals. In addition, tribunals and the Commissioners will not have to revise cases following a decision of the Commissioners and Courts in a lead case as they will be processed by the Agency.

Other measures will reduce the potential for backlogs to occur in the future. For example, the new disputes process will allow errors to be corrected quickly by the Department's Agencies and will reduce the number of cases that go to appeal. New powers to deal with meritless appeals and the more responsive composition of tribunals will speed up the handling of appeals as well.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will take personal responsibility for the administration of the appeals system, set and publish demanding targets to shorten the time it takes for appeals to be heard, and report on the results.

Mortgage Interest Payments

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many income support recipients with a mortgage are currently building up arrears because of the use of a standard interest rate; [15171]

(2) what estimate she has made of the total mortgage arrears run up to date by income support recipients with mortgages as a result of the use of a standard rate. [15170]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is not available.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have for encouraging those currently claiming incapacity benefit to gain employment. [15175]

Mr. Denham: The Government strongly believes that work is the best form of welfare for people of working age. We are committed to improving opportunities for sick and disabled people who want to work, including those receiving incapacity benefits, and have set aside some £195 million from the Windfall Tax to fund this important programme. We will use this money to explore a range of approaches to identify and pursue the best ways of helping people with disabilities and long-term health problems to move into work, and to avoid becoming dependent on long-term incapacity benefits.

We are consulting with disability organisations and employers on our proposals. These include funding a number of innovative schemes to explore how best to help people move into work or stay in work; introducing personal advisers to help sick and disabled people to overcome barriers to work; an information campaign to improve knowledge of the existing help available to help people into work and to change attitudes of benefit recipients, employers and the public; and a programme of research and evaluation to develop our understanding of the client group and to determine the effect of our initiatives.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total spent on cold weather payments during the winter of 1996–97. [15178]

Mr. Denham: In the winter of 1996–97 almost five million Cold Weather Payments were made at a cost of £42 million.

Supported Housing

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has for consultation on the long term funding arrangements for supported housing; and if she will make a statement. [14901]

Ms Harman *[pursuant to her reply, 5 November 1997, Official Report, c. 246]:* Securing stable, sustainable long term funding arrangements for supported housing will take time. The Government are keen to take the views of those working in the field before making any decision. I am therefore setting out our objectives for the long term. These are:

A Government-wide approach;

Clarifying responsibilities for controlling, targeting, and prioritising public expenditure on services supporting people in their homes—avoiding gaps and overlaps between budgets;

Ensuring the funding system can respond to individuals' needs and enable support to be provided in different types of accommodation and tenures;

Avoiding the possibility that accommodation choices may be distorted by the availability and interaction of different funding (this may result from the inter action of demand-led and cash-limited funding streams);

Encouraging coherent and transparent planning, funding and accountability arrangements—at the appropriate level—for support services in the context of wider community care and related programmes;

Compatibility with the Government's wider social policy objectives;

Encouraging the most cost effective approach across all sectors which takes account of all public expenditure costs; group and wider funding responsibilities, and links with other changes that authorities face;

Giving landlords confidence to make accommodation available to vulnerable people and to develop new provision;

Practicality—identifying solutions that are workable at central and local levels which could be implemented reasonably simply, considering what transitional arrangements might be necessary.

Departmental Officials will be contacting over two hundred individuals and organisations who responded to last year's Social Security Advisory Committee consultation. The Committee's report was published last week. We shall now ask respondents for their views on how best to translate these objectives into a modern, practical and sustainable funding system for this valuable social provision. Others who may wish to contribute to the debate are welcome to do so. Representations will be taken up to 5 December 1997.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 11 November 1997

HOME DEPARTMENT

Ibrahim Sey

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action has been taken following the unlawful killing verdict at the inquest of Ibrahim Sey; and if he will make a statement. [14481]

Mr. Michael: An inquest jury concluded that Mr. Sey's death was by unlawful killing. The cause of the death was found to be postural asphyxia and excited delirium. Concern about the use of CS gas has been expressed in press reports, and Counsel for Mr. Sey's family expressed concern about the possible role of CS but no evidence was submitted to show that CS contributed to Mr. Sey's death. There is nothing in the Coroner's comments to attribute Mr. Sey's death to the use of CS. The Coroner recommended changes to training, and that all police forces should review the use of CS sprays.

The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the Metropolitan Police have taken note of and reviewed the Coroner's recommendations and responded positively and immediately to them. This includes issuing clear instructions on how to deal with postural asphyxia and acute exhaustive mania in the near future.

After considering the implications, including the safety of the public and his officers, the Commissioner has decided that it is appropriate for CS spray to be issued to all Metropolitan Police officers. The use of CS spray will be carefully monitored by the Metropolitan Police.

In view of the large number of officers involved in the incident, the Metropolitan Police are considering to whom the verdict applies. This is complicated by the fact that it is not the role of an inquest to apportion blame to individuals. The Metropolitan Police have removed ten police officers from operational duty until their individual positions can be established.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 4 June (Ref. 5345038). [15351]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I sent an interim reply to my hon. Friend on 25 June and a final reply on 10 November.

Casinos

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the regulation of advertising by the casino industry. [14917]

Mr. George Howarth: Under section 42 of the Gaming Act 1968, casinos may not advertise their location or facilities.

We are considering the proposals for partial relaxation of the ban on advertising set out in the November 1996 consultation paper "Second Consultation on Casino Deregulation". We will announce the outcome of our consideration in due course.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the expansion of the casino industry into other geographical areas in the United Kingdom. [14918]

Mr. George Howarth: Regulations made under the Gaming Act 1968 confine the licensing of casinos to 53 permitted areas in Great Britain; 116 casinos were operating there on 31 March 1997.

The previous Government consulted on proposals to designate additional permitted areas. We are considering whether new permitted areas are desirable in principle. We will make our conclusions known in due course.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement concerning the level of trade union organisation in the casino industry. [14916]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government have no separate figures on trade union organisation or membership in the casino industry.

Exports Initiative

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the decision was taken to end the Home Office Exports Initiative; and when it will be terminated. [14960]

Mr. Michael: The decision to end the Home Office Exports Initiative was taken in July. It was terminated at the end of October.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of companies which will be affected by the decision to terminate the Home Office Exports Initiative. [14961]

Mr. Michael: During the period of the Exports Initiative, it is estimated that the Home Office Exports Promoter had dealings with some 80 companies, including those who participated in trade events sponsored by the Initiative. These companies, together with others in the policing and security sector, will continue to have access to the full range of overseas trade services of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the savings which will be made by abolishing the Home Office Exports Initiative. [14963]

Mr. Michael: The initiative had an annual budget of £100,000; approximately £40,000 of this will be saved in the current financial year.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has made for a scheme to replace the Home Office Exports Initiative. [14962]

Mr. Michael: The trade associations and companies in the policing and security sector will continue to have access to the full range of overseas trade services of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. My right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade is considering what specific additional support for exporting may be provided for this sector.

Burglar Alarms

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the costs of false burglar alarm call-outs for each police force in England and Wales in each of the past three years. [14829]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is not collected centrally. I understand that last year the Association of Chief Police Officers introduced a policy to reduce false alarms by 10 per cent. per year over four years. In 1996–97, false calls fell by 12.2 per cent. and the target is likely to be met again in 1997–98.

Data Protection

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish a list of the responses to the consultation paper, "Data Protection: the Government's Proposals." [14834]

Mr. George Howarth: I have placed the list in the Library.

Gaming Act 1968

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the proposal in the report of the Gaming Board for 1996–97 that there is a need for substantial reform of the Gaming Act 1968. [14915]

Mr. George Howarth: We are carefully considering this. The Government will make their intentions known in due course.

Metropolitan Police (Equal Opportunities)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the staffing complement of the P2 branch of the Metropolitan Police service's equal opportunities unit; and if he will make a statement on its current level of staffing. [15024]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner informs me that there are five staff allocated to the Equal Opportunities Unit in the Metropolitan Police, P2 branch. I am told that the Unit is not carrying any vacancies and that the current level of staffing is considered appropriate to the work of the branch.

The Unit has some administrative responsibilities and advises senior managers and personnel managers in the Metropolitan Police on matters concerning equal opportunities and fairness relating both to police and civil staff. I am told that the Unit does not itself investigate cases. Investigations are carried out by the Complaints Investigation Bureau or Area Complaints Investigation Branches.

The responsibility for ensuring equality of opportunity through the Metropolitan Police rests with all members of the Service.

Post-release Support Services

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 28 July, *Official Report*, columns 3–4, if he will review the provision of post-release support services for long sentence prisoners whose convictions have been overturned by the Court of Appeal. [13088]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The support services to which my hon. Friend the Minister of State referred in his reply to a question from my hon. Friend on 28 July, *Official Report*, columns 3–4, are national and local voluntary organisations which provide help to prisoners on release. It is for those organisations, which are independent from government, to decide what services they are able to offer.

As my hon. Friend also mentioned, probation services are able to help with resettlement problems experienced by released prisoners. Since those who have had their convictions overturned would be free of any ties with the criminal justice system and its agencies, there is no statutory obligation for probation services to provide assistance to people in these circumstances. However, probation services can, and do, provide help on a voluntary basis. Again, it would be for the service concerned to decide what help it is able to offer in the particular circumstances. The Government currently have no plans to introduce any legislative requirements to compel probation services, or any other organisation, to provide support services to prisoners whose convictions have been overturned.

Equal Opportunities

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown of *(a)* the numbers and *(b)* the percentages, of police officers according to their grade, by (i) gender and (ii) ethnic origin. [14979]

Mr. Michael: The latest available information is given in the table.

Police strength, England and Wales, 31 March 1997 (excluding secondments)

Rank	Male		Female		White		Black		Asian		Other		Total
	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	
Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) Ranks	184	94.8	10	5.2	193	99.5	0	—	1	0.5	0	—	194
Superintendent	1,248	96.9	40	3.1	1,286	99.8	1	0.1	1	0.1	—	—	1,288
Chief Inspector	1,611	95.6	74	4.4	1,675	99.4	5	0.3	2	0.1	3	0.2	1,684

Police strength, England and Wales, 31 March 1997 (excluding secondments)

Rank	Male		Female		White		Black		Asian		Other		Total
	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	Number	Per cent.	
Inspector	5,899	95.3	291	4.7	6,153	99.4	11	0.2	14	0.2	12	0.2	6,190
Sergeant	17,585	93.3	1,265	6.7	18,653	99.0	66	0.3	82	0.4	50	0.3	18,850
Constable	79,604	82.4	17,030	17.6	94,636	97.9	917	0.9	656	0.7	425	0.4	96,634
Total	106,131	85.0	18,710	15.0	122,595	98.2	999	0.8	756	0.6	490	0.4	124,841

DUCHY OF LANCASTER

Quangos

Mr. Terry Lewis: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster what proposals he has to make quangos more open, accountable and effective. [15848]

Dr. David Clark: The Government are determined to make quangos more accountable for what they do, more open in how they do it and more effective in achieving their aims. I am pleased to announce the publication today of the consultation paper "Opening up Quangos", which builds on the valuable work done by the Committee on Standards in Public Life under Lord Nolan's chairmanship.

Our proposals mark a new phase in opening up quangos to public scrutiny and making them more accountable to the people they serve. The Government's devolution policy will help to bring quangos in Scotland and Wales under the proper level of scrutiny that a modern democracy demands. Our purpose is the same for public bodies which operate on a United Kingdom or Great Britain basis, or an England or England and Wales basis. The proposals in the consultation paper will help to achieve this.

Copies of the consultation paper are being widely circulated and placed on the Internet, as well as in the House libraries. Copies will be sent personally to all right hon. and hon. Members. The results of the consultation exercise will be taken into account in the preparation of the Government's White Paper on Better Government, due to be published next year.

I am also pleased to announce the publication today of "The Executive Non-Departmental Public Bodies 1997 Report", which summarises for the first time the main objectives and achievements of the larger executive non-departmental public bodies, charting their performance against key targets. This is the first of a series of annual publications that will develop in detail and coverage in future years and improve measurement of the performance of public bodies.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14958]

Mr. Kilfoyle *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* The Cabinet Office, including the Office of Public Service and its agencies (Civil Service College, Property Advisers to the Civil Estate, Security Facilities Executive, the Buying Agency, Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency and Government Car and Despatch Agency) and the Central Office of Information, have no record of entering into any contracts or of holding any discussions with Monitor Consultancy since 1990.

PRIME MINISTER

Climate Change Conference

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Prime Minister what is the composition of the United Kingdom delegation to the Climate Change Conference at Kyoto; and if he will make a statement. [15589]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Minister for the Environment, accompanied of officials, will represent the United Kingdom at the third Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister what monitoring is undertaken of the ethnic balance among staff whose salaries are paid from the Civil List; and what estimate he has made of the proportion of such staff who are from ethnic minorities. [15432]

The Prime Minister: The Personnel Office at Buckingham Palace maintains records of the ethnic origin of all Royal Household employees including those whose salaries are paid from the Civil List. Currently approximately 3 per cent. of Civil List employees are from ethnic minorities. The Royal Household is an equal opportunities employer (that is to say appointment and promotion are on ability without regard to sex, ethnic origin or religion).

Minister without Portfolio

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if the forthcoming White Paper on Freedom of Information will consider the answering practices of the Minister without Portfolio. [14515]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* No.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the decision of the Minister without Portfolio to give no information in respect of conversations, meetings or other engagements undertaken in pursuance of his duties as Minister without Portfolio and its consistency with parliamentary accountability. [14523]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* No.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Delegated Legislation

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list all *(a)* secondary, *(b)* other delegated legislation and *(c)* all deregulation orders his Department made during the summer adjournment. [14377]

Mr. Tom Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *216*.

Millennium Projects

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the educational benefits of the millennium projects. [13396]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Millennium Commission has always been committed to supporting projects which provide access to information and sources of learning, and education has emerged as one of five key themes in the Commission's grant programmes. For example, over £33 million has been offered in grant to the new University for the Highlands and Islands, and most of the larger funded projects have a major educational element. The Government intends that the Millennium Experience and its associated national programme will have a significant educational aspect for visitors and participants, as well as being entertaining. It is envisaged that the Dome at Greenwich will become the hub of a new national digital network for learning.

Sports Broadcasting

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received concerning changes to the listing of sports events for broadcast on terrestrial television channels; and if he will make a statement. [14982]

Mr. Fisher: Since the current review of the listed events was announced in May, some 609 representations have been received on this subject, including 18 letters from hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be making a statement shortly.

Violent Films

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received on the showing of violent films on national television, with particular reference to "Natural Born Killers"; and if he will make a statement. [14812]

Mr. Fisher: The Department has received 17 letters about violence on television in the last three months. One of the letters received this month referred specifically to the film "Natural Born Killers" to be shown on Channel 5 on 8 November.

A working party established by the broadcasting regulators is currently pursuing initiatives to meet public concern about the portrayal of violence and I understand [illegible] its conclusions early in the [illegible]

National Libraries Week

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps the Government are taking to support National Libraries Week. [14980]

Mr. Fisher: The Government wholeheartedly supports National Libraries Week and has been actively involved with the preparations for it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State wrote to all MPs to publicise National Libraries Week, and to encourage them to become involved in library events in their constituencies. He also launched the Week at the House of Commons on Monday 3 November. DCMS Ministers have subsequently been involved in a number of other related events during the Week.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list *(a)* the nature an value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions Ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14947]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* My Department was established in 1992 and since that date has not let any contracts, nor held any discussions, with the Monitor Consultancy.

Tennis

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of tennis clubs in England during each of the last 25 years. [15147]

Mr. Banks: According to the Lawn Tennis Association's (LTA) Survey of 1996, there are a total of 3,200 tennis clubs in England of which 2,400 are affiliated to the LTA. This compares against 2,700 LTA affiliated clubs 25 years ago.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much lottery funding has been provided to local tennis clubs to secure the freehold purchase of their existing grounds. [15151]

Mr. Banks: The English Sports Council has made awards totalling £184,649, to two tennis clubs to assist with the freehold purchase of their existing grounds.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for culture, Media and Sport how many people in England he estimates play tennis; and what have been the trends over the last 25 years. [15150]

Mr. Banks: According to the Lawn Tennis Association's (LTA) Survey of 1996, there are 4.5 million people who play tennis in England, of which 1.75 million play regularly (once a fortnight or more). I understand that the LTA have not kept records of tennis participation levels for the last 25 years.

Sports Clubs

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the minimum length of [illegible]

Mr. Banks: The minimum length of leasehold required is dependent on the size of the award, as follows:

	Years
Up to £5,000	3
£5,001–£10,000	5
£10,001–£15,000	7
£15,001–£25,000	10
£25,001–£35,000	12
£35,001–£50,000	15
More than £50,000	21

British Academy for Sport

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he plans to announce the location of the British Academy for Sport. [14420]

Mr. Banks: We hope to make an announcement on the location shortly.

Concessionary Television Licences

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on anomalies within the current concessionary television licence scheme. [14435]

Mr. Fisher: The regulations governing the concessionary scheme give rise to a number of real and perceived anomalies. However, changes at the margins of the scheme, to address such anomalies, would most likely create new ones and would do little to improve the public acceptability of the scheme. The current Agreement between the Government and the BBC specifies that the licence fee system will continue until 2002. In reviewing the arrangements for funding the BBC after the year 2002 we shall also comprehensively examine the concessionary arrangements. In the meantime, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has produced a simplified explanatory leaflet on the concessionary scheme, which explains the qualifying criteria for the concession and answers some common questions about the scheme. Copies of the leaflet have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Tobacco Sponsorship

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the impact of withdrawal of tobacco sponsorship on sport; and if he will make a statement. [14904]

Mr. Banks: We are looking very carefully at how best to achieve an end to the advertising and promotion of tobacco at sports events in a way which will minimise any damage to the sports concerned. Discussions are underway within Government on how best to achieve this and I am consulting the sports concerned. Plans include a transitional period. The Government will publish a White Paper next year setting out measures to tackle tobacco consumption.

After considering the issue of sponsorship in great depth the Government has proposed excluding Formula One from the scope of the proposed EU Directive on pursuing twin objectives of reducing smoking and of safeguarding sport from any effects arising from the loss of tobacco sponsorship. The fact is that a blanket Europe-wide ban on Formula One sponsorship would not only mean fewer Grand Prix in Europe, but also, perversely, more tobacco advertising on our TV screens beamed in from events outside the European Union.

Television Licences (Hotels)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) how many hotel television licences have been issued in each year since 1990; and what was the total revenue received by the BBC from hotel television licences for each of these years; [14566]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to prevent the evasion of television licensing regulations by the proprietors of hotels; [14568]

(3) what estimate he has made of the revenue lost to the BBC through the evasion of television licensing regulations by hotels. [14567]

Mr. Fisher *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* Records of television licence fee revenue received from hotels are available only from 1991. Licence fee revenue from hotels since 1991 is:

Year	*Number of hotel licences issued (000s)*	*Revenue (£ million)*
1991–92	60	4.6
1992–93	58	4.7
1993–94	61	5.0
1994–95	65	5.5
1995–96	65	5.3
1996–97	66	6.1

Under the Broadcasting Act 1990, the BBC has been responsible for the administration of the television licensing system since April 1991. We understand from the BBC that no separate estimate is available of the cost of television licence fee evasion by the hotel trade. The BBC's agent, TV Licensing, makes use of a national hotels database, in addition to standard enforcement procedures, to ensure compliance by hotels with the licensing regulations, and new guidance issued to TV Licensing's enquiry officers includes specific instructions on hotels.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the guidelines or directives issued by the European Commission on the millennium computer problem; and if she will make a statement. [13156]

Mrs. Roche: No guidelines have been issued by the Commission.

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the call on departmental budgets required to carry out the

Mrs. Roche: Each department is responsible for dealing with the Year 2000 problem affecting its own computers. Within core DTI the cost of dealing with the problem is estimated at £2.7m which will be found from existing PES provision. Agencies are responsible for their own programmes of work.

Competition Policy

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list those organisations which have responded to the draft Bill on competition policy. [12986]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: The organisations and individuals who have responded to the consultation document "A prohibition approach to anti-competitive agreements and abuse of dominant position: draft Bill" to date are as follows:

Allen & Overy
Anderson & Company
Anti Copying in Design
Ashurst Morris Crisp
Association Gas Supplies Ltd.
Association for Payment Clearing Services
Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry
Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
Association of Consulting Engineers
A.T. & T. (UK) Ltd.
Baker & McKenzie
B.A.T. Industries
BATMark
Berwin Leighton
B.G. plc.
Bishop & Robertson Chalmers
B.L.W.A.—Association of The Laboratory Supply Industry
Lord Borrie Q.C.
Brewers & Licensed Retailers Association
British Alcan Aluminium plc.
Bristows Cooke & Carpmael
British Brands Group
British Broadcasting Corporation
British Energy
British Insurers' International Committee
British Music Rights
British Petroleum
The British Phonographic Industry
British Printing Industries Federation
British Property Federation
British Retail Consortium
British Standards Institution
British Steel
British Telecom
Burger King
Burness
Michael Burnside Esq.
Mr. Justice Buxton
Cable & Wireless
Campaign For Real Ale
Chemical Industries Association
The Cinema Exhibitors' Association
City of London Law Society
Professor Roger Clarke
Clifford Chance
B. Colgate Esq.
Combined Merchants (UK) Ltd.
Commercial Radio Companies Association
The Community Pharmacy Action Group
Competition Law Association
Confederation of British Industry
Confederation of Passenger Transport UK
Conoco Europe Gas Ltd.
Construction Confederation
Construction Industry Council
Consumers' Association
The Council for Professions Supplementary to Medicine
Cooper & Lybrand
Coudert Brothers
Dairy Industry Federation
Professor Steve Davies
Dawson, Mason & Carr
Dibb Lupton Alsop
Dixons Group plc/S. J. Berwin & Co.
The Document Company: Xerox
Jonathan Downing Esq.
Electricity Industry/Eversheds
Energy Intensive Users Group
English Welsh & Scottish Railway
Enron Europe Ltd.
Esso
Eversheds
F. J. Cleveland & Company
Federation of Agricultural Co-operatives (UK) Ltd.
The Federation of Environmental Trade Associations
Federation of Small Businesses
Finance & Leasing Association
Food & Drink Federation
The Forum of Private Business
Mark Furse Esq.
Garretts
Gas Consumers Council
General Cable
General Dental Council
GKN Plc.
Herbert Smith
Holman, Fenwick & Willan
Simon Hossack Esq.
Clive Howard-Luck Esq.
Martin Howe Esq.
Independent Television Association
The Insolvency Council
The Institute of Chartered Secretaries & Administrators
Johnsons News Group
Kingfisher

Linklaters & Paines
Lloyd's
London International Insurance & Reinsurance Market Association
London Transport
Lovell White Durrant
McCullochs
Marks & Spencer
Mars/Lovell White Durrant
Music Industries Association
National Association of Master Bakers
The National Association of Estate Agents
National Consumer Council
National Federation of Retail Newsagents
National Food Alliance
National Power
The Newspaper Publishers Association Ltd.
Newspaper Publishing plc.
The Newspaper Society
Northern Ireland Electricity
Norton Rose
NTL (UK)
Office of the Rail Regulator
Office of Telecommunications
One 2 One
Passenger Transport Executive Group
Peachey & Co.
Pinsent Curtis
The Post Office
Leolin Price C.B.E Q.C.
Producers Industrial Relations Service Ltd.
Proprietary Association of Great Britain
Rt. Hon. John Redwood M.P.
Regulatory Policy Institute
Retail Motor Industry Federation
Reuters
Jonathan Rickford Esq.
The Royal Institution Of Chartered Surveyors
Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain
Scottish Association of Master Bakers
Scottish Power
Thomas Sharpe Q.C.
Shell International Ltd.
Simmons & Simmons
Singletons
Slaughter and May
The Society of Motor Manufacturers & Traders Ltd.
Somerset County Council
The Takeover Panel
The Telecommunications Managers Association
Tesco
Trade Marks Patents And Designs Federation
Travers Smith Braithwaite
UK Offshore Operators Association Ltd.
UK Petroleum Industry Association Ltd.
Professor John Vickers
The Water Companies Association
Water Services Association
Derek Webb Esq.
Wedlake Bell
Tony Weir Esq.
Whitbread Plc.
Nicholas Williams Esq.
Wragge & Co.

The Department of Trade and Industry has also been engaged in detailed exchanges about the Bill with other public bodies, including the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, the Office of Fair Trading, OFTEL, ORR, OFGAS, OFFER, OFWAT and OFREG (NI).

Banking Industry

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade (1) what meetings have taken place between members of her Department and representatives of the United Bank Ltd. in 1997 to date; [14971]

(2) what meetings have taken place between members of her Department and representatives of the Banking Insurance and Finance Union to date. [14972]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Members of my Department hold meetings with a wide range of organisations. Details of these meetings and the matters discussed are not held centrally. The information requested could therefore only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what representations she has received regarding the industrial dispute in the United Bank Ltd. [14970]

Mr. Ian McCartney: My Department has received some representations from the Banking Insurance and Finance Union about this dispute.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the Government's policy towards employment relations in banks. [14976]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Employment relations in banks, as elsewhere, are a matter for the management and employees concerned.

Patents

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Board of Trade how many proposals were patented in each year since 1990; and how many have been taken up. [15165]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Since 1990 the United Kingdom Patent Office has granted patents as follows:

Year	*Total*	*UK applications*
1990	9,396	3,265
1991	9,346	3,307
1992	9,421	3,331
1993	8,330	3,019
1994		

During the same period, the European Patent Office granted the patents covering the United Kingdom under the European Patent Convention, to which the United Kingdom is a signatory, as follows:

Year	Total	UK applications
1990	22,783	1,096
1991	24,729	1,186
1992	28,407	1,311
1993	34,256	1,470
1994	39,242	1,705
1995	38,877	1,596
1996	37,203	1,585

Information on which of these has been commercially exploited is not available, and could not be compiled at reasonable cost. However, during this period the following total numbers of patents covering the UK were renewed, perhaps indicating commercial exploitation:

Year	Total
1990	230,994
1991	227,220
1992	228,665
1993	222,897
1994	230,566
1995	243,732
1996	256,991

A breakdown of this table to cover UK applicants could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Professional Qualifications

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the President of the Board of Trade for what reasons the Institute of Financial Accountants qualifications were not included in the list of professional qualifications in the European Communities (Recognition of Professional Qualifications) Regulations 1991; and if she will list *(a)* those professions and *(b)* professional qualifications which are recognised in EU countries under the Regulations. [14934]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Statutory Instrument 1991 No. 824 lists professions which are regulated by law or public authority in the UK and professional titles awarded by bodies incorporated by Royal Charter. Since the Institute of Financial Accountants does not fall within those categories it is not necessary for its qualifications to be listed in the Statutory Instrument.

The list of professions and titles in Statutory Instrument 1991 No. 824 is not intended to be exhaustive. The EU Directives dealing with mutual recognition of professional qualifications lay down rules which apply to the recognition of all professional qualifications (including those relevant to the Institute of Financial Accountants) whether or not listed in internal legislation of Member States.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list each of the overseas trips made by himself and other members of his ministerial team since 2 May, specifying in each case *(a)* the participating Minister or Ministers, *(b)* the destination of the trip, *(c)* the purpose of the trip and *(d)* the cost of the trip; and if he will make a statement. [15256]

Mr. Hoon: The following overseas visits have been made by Ministers in the Lord Chancellor's Department since 2 May:

1. (a) participating Minister: The Lord Chancellor, accompanied by a Private Secretary and Press Officer

(b) destination: Hong Kong

(c) purpose of trip: to express confidence in the HKSAR's enthusiasm to continue the Basic Law as expressed in the Joint Declaration in 1984. This stated that:

> "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region will be vested with executive, legislative and independent judicial powers, including that of final adjudication. The laws currently in force in Hong Kong will remain basically unchanged".

In particular, the Lord Chancellor discussed with the Chief Justice of Hong Kong arrangements for making sitting Law Lords available from the UK to sit judicially in Hong King. He also met leading politicians representing all the main interests in Hong Kong.

(d) cost of the trip: £17,186.53

2. (a) participating Minister: Mr. Geoff Hoon, accompanied by a Private secretary and an official.

(b) destination: Strasbourg and Potsdam

(c) purpose of the trip: to participate in discussions on the European Court of Human Rights following implementation of Protocol 11 to the ECHR and to have discussions with MEPs and others on legal matters concerning the forthcoming UK Presidency of the EU.

(d) cost of the trip: £2,560.30

Public Record Office

Mr. Baker: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department how many documents deemed appropriate for release for public scrutiny are currently withdrawn from the Public Record Office by the Department of origin. [14451]

Mr. Hoon: The Question concerns a specific operational matter on which the Chief Executive of the Public Record Office is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked the Chief Executive to reply direct.

Letter from Sarah Tyacke to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 7 November 1997:

PQ 98/335: Documents withdrawn from the Public Record Office by the Department of Origin

I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question about the above.

Four thousand six hundred and fifty documents are currently temporarily withdrawn from the Public Record Office by the department of origin, as authorised by section 4(6) of the Public Records Act, 1958. Most of these documents are deemed appropriate for release for public scrutiny and even when temporarily withdrawn can be made available on demand by a member of the public for consultation in our reading rooms or in the withdrawing department. However I regret that we do not separately enumerate the documents in this category.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Kirkby Stephen Bypass

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the inspector's report on the Kirkby Stephen bypass was seen by Ministers before publication was abandoned. [14172]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The inspectors report on the Kirkby Stephen Bypass proposal is still under consideration by the Secretary of State as he has received no formal notification that the proposal has been abandoned.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what communication or discussion there has been between Ministers or officials in his Department and councillors or officials of Cumbria County Council over the handling of the inspector's report on the Kirkby Stephen bypass. [14171]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* There has been no communication or discussion between Ministers and representatives of Cumbria County Council. County Council officials have recently enquired of my officials the position regarding the Inspector's report in the event of the statutory Orders for the scheme being withdrawn. My officials are awaiting formal notification from the County Council of its intentions in relation to the future of the scheme. However, I can tell the right hon. Member that, in the event of the statutory Orders being withdrawn, in line with Departmental policy the Secretary of State would propose to publish the report.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations his Department received relating to publication of the inspector's report on the Kirkby Stephen bypass. [14173]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* My Department has received a verbal representation from Cumbria County Council officials in relation to this matter. No other representations have been received.

Public Inquiry Reports

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when was the last occasion on which his Department did not publish the report of an inspector following a public inquiry. [14170]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The Government have never failed to publish an Inspectors Report following a Public Inquiry into Local Highway Authority Orders.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what compensation payments would have been required to have been made, and to whom, had the decision to proceed with the Birmingham Northern Relief Road not been taken. [13778]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* As Section 1(4) of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 requires, the Birmingham Northern Relief Road Concession Agreement makes provision in certain circumstances for compensation payments to the Concessionaire. Under the Agreement signed in February 1992 by the previous Government the detailed provisions about compensation payments were agreed to be commercially confidential.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what compensation payments are payable to the Government in the event that Midland Expressway Ltd. decide to withdraw from the concession agreement to construct and operate the Birmingham Northern Relief Road. [13777]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* As Section 1(5) of the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 requires, the Birmingham Northern Relief Road Concession Agreement makes provision in certain circumstances for compensation payments to the Government. Under the Agreement signed in February 1992 by the previous Government the detailed provisions about compensation payments were agreed to be commercially confidential.

Local Authority Funding

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy *(a)* to return to a needs-based capital approvals allocation system and *(b)* that any increased capital allocation will be made to local authorities via basic credit approvals. [14196]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government are carrying out a Comprehensive Spending Review, a root and branch review of public spending in all Government Departments. Conclusions will emerge in new spending plans and in new policies reflecting the Government's priorities next year. In parallel with this, we have set up a review to look at the future arrangements for local authority finance, in close collaboration with local government and representative organisations. This will include consideration of capital allocation systems and options for local authority support for capital expenditure. We will be consulting widely from late Autumn on particular aspects of the system and plan to issue a White Paper in the Spring on our policies for local government in England, including finance, best value and democratic renewal.

In 1998–99 we have agreed that the HIP allocations will be based on 50 per cent. on need, whereas previously it had been intended that 100 per cent. of the allocation would be subject to ministerial discretion. We have also

agreed that the allocation of Supplementary Credit Approvals under our Capital Receipts Initiative should be made on the basis of 66 per cent. reflecting need.

Channel Tunnel

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the likely date for completion of the channel tunnel rail link; and if he will make a statement. [14555]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Development Agreement, the construction of the CTRL is the responsibility of London and Continental Railways Ltd. I understand from LCR that they expect to complete the CTRL during 2003.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to make the first payment to London and Continental Railways under the agreement under the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996. [14551]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government's contract with LCR provides for the first instalment of capital grant to be paid when LCR have completed 68 per cent. of the CTRL by value. I understand from LCR that they expect the first instalment of grant will fall due during 2001.

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the difference between the actual passenger numbers on Eurostar in 1996–97 and the Government's estimate for that period when it was handed over to London and Continental Railways. [14552]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In the 1996 calendar year Eurostar carried 4.9 million passengers on the London-Paris/Brussels routes and in the first nine months of 1997 they have carried 4.54 million passengers. This represents a 20 per cent. increase on the same period for 1996. The previous Government made no estimates of future Eurostar patronage at the time of transfer of the business to London and Continental Railways.

Housing (Wheelchair Access)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extent Part M of the Building Regulations. [14497]

Mr. Raynsford: I plan to make a statement shortly on the extension of Part M of the Building Regulations to new dwellings.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many homes have been constructed in each of the last five years that do not meet the standards set out for accessibility by disabled people under the terms of the changes proposed in 1995 to Part M of the Building Regulations. [14498]

Mr. Raynsford: It is not possible to give a full assessment of how many homes do, or do not, meet the standards of accessibility proposed in 1995 as it is not possible to quantify homes constructed in the private sector which have incorporated accessibility for disabled people on a voluntary basis. As a broad indication, however, a comparison can be made between total housing completions in Great Britain and homes completed by Housing Associations, or registered social landlords, where Housing Corporation Housing Development Scheme Standards will have applied. Those standards provide accessibility for disabled people comparable to the changes proposed to the Building Regulations in 1995. The relevant figures for the last five years are:

	Total completions (thousands)	*Housing Association completions (thousands)*
1992	171.9	26.3
1993	178.5	35.4
1994	186.0	36.7
1995	190.7	38.4
1996	179.0	31.5
1997 (Q1, 2 and 3)	133.9	20.2

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the average waiting time for social housing for people requiring a home built to wheelchair standards. [14500]

Mr. Raynsford: Information on average waiting times for social housing is not collected centrally.

In 1991, the former Department of the Environment carried out research into access into local authority housing. The research included a very small number of applicants requiring a home built to wheelchair standards. Their average waiting time was 21 months.

However, the research did not cover access to housing association accommodation. Since 1988, housing associations have been key providers of homes built to wheelchair standards.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the percentage of homes to be constructed using the capital receipts that will *(a)* be accessible to disabled people and *(b)* meet wheelchair standards under the terms of the extension proposed in 1995 of Part M of the Building Regulations. [14499]

Mr. Raynsford: It is not possible to estimate the percentage of homes constructed using capital receipts that will be accessible to disabled people as the use made of capital receipts is at the discretion of local authorities. However, where local authorities choose to use capital receipts to support registered social landlords normal Housing Corporation Development Scheme Standards will apply. Those standards provide accessibility for disabled people comparable with the 1995 proposals for extending Part M of the Building Regulations to new dwellings, including accessibility for wheelchair users for the purposes of visitability.

London Underground

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the Government's plans for the future of London Underground. [14701]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are considering a wide range of options for public-private partnerships for London Underground, while ruling out wholesale privatisation. The options being considered were detailed in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), *Official Report*, 3 November 1997 column 67.

Minister for London and Construction (Visits)

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister if he will list the towns and cities outside the United Kingdom visited by the Minister for London and Construction and the dates on which the visits took place since 1 May. [15025]

Mr. Raynsford: From 27 to 31 August, I visited New York, Boston and Washington, USA on a fact finding trip to learn about the US experience of Mayoral systems and to speak at the American Political Science Association Conference. On 24 and 25 September, I attended the EU Housing Ministers' meeting in Amsterdam. Between 3 and 10 October, I led a construction trade delegation of 17 British companies to promote British trade overseas. The delegation visited Amman and Aqaba in Jordan and Sharm El Sheikh and Cairo in Egypt. On 17 October, I visited Cologne in Germany to meet the Mayor of Cologne and discuss German Mayoral systems, from 6 to 9 November, I visited Madrid and Barcelona in Spain to learn about Spanish experiences of Mayoral systems and also to speak at the 1st Conference of the European Federation of Town Centres on Town centre management.

Pavements

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to local authorities concerning the exercise of their powers to keep pavements free of advertising boards and goods for sale. [14839]

Mr. Raynsford: There is sufficient guidance to local planning authorities on control of outdoor advertisements in the Department's Circular 5/92, using powers in the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 1992. Local highway authorities have powers in the Highways Act 1980 to remove obstructions on pavements. Both planning and highway authorities must consider whether to exercise these powers on a case-by-case basis.

Consultants

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the consultancy firms and the directors of consultancy firms who are employed to work on best value pilots for local councils; and if he will make available details of these contracts. [14767]

Mr. Raynsford: Following a competitive tender, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has awarded a research contract worth £½ million to the Local Government Centre at Warwick University's Business School to conduct an evaluation of all the Best Value pilot schemes. The study, which will be directed by Dr. Steve Martin, with Professor John Benington in support, started in October of this year and will finish in Autumn 2000. Principal researchers on the study include Dr. Mike Geddes and Dr. Jean Hartley (of the Local Government Centre), Dr. Ian Sanderson (of the policy Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University) and Tony Bovaird (Aston Business School).

The details of any contracts entered into by individual local authorities are matters for those authorities.

Road Accidents

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road accidents over the most recent annual period for which figures are available were *(a)* drink related and *(b)* drugs related. [14557]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* In 1996 there were 10,850 accidents involving death or injury in which at least one driver or motorcycle rider was over the legal limit. No comparable figures are available for drugs-related accidents. However the Department is currently one year into a three-year research programme to assess the incidence of drugs-driving and its implications for road safety.

Roads (Private Finance)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what support he is giving to local authorities to develop road schemes using private sector finance. [14774]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* My Department has taken a number of measures to facilitate local authority PFI projects, including highway and other transport schemes. These include the introduction of a Bill to clarify local authorities powers to enter into PFI contracts, consultation on a draft instrument to permit local authorities to delegate a range of highway functions and the release of model contract documents developed for Highways Agency roads.

Advance Corporation Tax

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the estimates of the financial costs of the changes made to ACT in July 1997 budget made by *(a)* Chelmsford Borough Council and *(b)* Essex County Council; [15071]

(2) what representations his Department has received in respect of making full compensation available to *(a)* Chelmsford Borough Council and *(b)* Essex County council for the impact that the changes to ACT will have on their budgets. [15073]

Mr. Raynsford: Representations have been received from the Local Government Association and several local authorities, including Essex County Council and Chelmsford Borough Council. The Local Government Association, with the support of my Department and the United Kingdom Steering Committee on Local Authority Pensions, is establishing by means of a national survey the impact of the Budget changes on local authority employers' pension costs. This information will be used to inform the actuarial valuations of each fund and how future employers' pension costs in Essex and elsewhere are affected. These factors, and any others which will

emerge from the 1998 actuarial valuations, will be taken into account when the level of local authority provision is determined for 1999–2000 and for subsequent years.

Out-of-town Leisure Complexes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what his Department's policy is towards existing planning guidance in relation to large out of town leisure complexes which may impact on existing facilities; and what plans he has to issue new planning guidance to cover out-of-town leisure complexes; [14739]

(2) what plans he has to issue new planning guidance to minimise the disturbance to local residents caused by large out-of-town leisure complexes. [14738]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government are firmly committed to the objectives of Planning Policy Guidance Note 6: "Town Centres and Retail Developments", which seeks to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of our existing city, town and district centres by making them the focus for investment, particularly in retail, office, leisure and other appropriate developments.

The Government propose to ensure that the approach in PPG6 is applied just as firmly to leisure developments as to retail developments. In applying the sequential approach to selecting sites, the Government will expect developers to demonstrate why they could not develop elements of a large scheme on more central sites, with less on-site car parking.

The current policy for leisure developments, therefore, consists of PPG6 and the Government Response to the Report of the Environment Committee (Cm 3729). We have no current plans to issue further guidance.

The Department will shortly be commissioning research on planning and leisure development. We will want to consider the implication of that research before considering whether guidance on this aspect needs to be amended.

Local planning authorities are required to determine planning applications in accordance with their development plans, unless other material considerations indicate otherwise. Factors such as the impact of large out-of-town leisure complexes on the neighbourhood are capable of being material planning considerations, and where appropriate, local planning authorities can impose conditions on planning permission to minimise such impacts.

Water Meters

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will assess the hardship caused to pensioner one-person households who are unable to have water meters installed due to technical difficulties but are not entitled to rebates on their water rates; and if he will make a statement. [14097]

Angela Eagle: The Government are undertaking a review of the water charging system in England and Wales to ensure that it operates in a fair and equitable way. We have made clear our opposition to compulsory metering for essential household use under current arrangements, but we shall be looking at metering policy including the availability of meters to customers who wish to pay on a measured basis. The review will pay particular attention to the effect of present charging methods on special cases such as large households, single persons and low income households including pensioners.

Health Action Zones

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been his Department's role in developing the Government's proposals for health action zones. [14586]

Angela Eagle: We have been working closely with the Department of Health to encourage positive links between health action zones and other area-based programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund. An official from the Department will sit on a national reference panel to advise on the bids.

Local Government Review

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the total cost to date of all stages of the local government review process for *(a)* his Department *(b)* local councils in England. [14588]

Mr. Raynsford: The cost of the Local Government Commission, which undertook the structural review of Local Government between 1992 and 1997, was £21.261 million. Under the Local Government Re-organisation Costs Scheme the most recently available bids for transitional costs submitted by all reorganising authorities in respect of expenditure incurred between 1994–95 and 1997–98 total £439.152 million.

Utility Trenching

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will review the impact of unregulated utility trenching on the environment in the west midlands. [14725]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, local highway authorities have a duty to co-ordinate utility street works and the utilities have a duty to co-operate with the highway authorities and with each other. The Act also imposes requirements as to the standard of reinstatements and as to signing and guarding of works in progress. The Government keep the working of the Act under review and expect to make changes to the associated secondary legislation from time to time.

Regional Development Agency, West Midlands

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he will take to include the voluntary sector in the preliminary planning for a Regional Development Agency in the west midlands. [14724]

Mr. Caborn: In taking forward our proposals for Regional Development Agencies in England, we have closely involved all the key stakeholders in each region, including those from the voluntary sector. Detailed arrangements for the Regional Development Agencies will be set out in a White Paper on England's regions to be published in the next few weeks.

Uniform Business Rate

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of the uniform business rate was paid by small and medium enterprises; and what was the uniform business rate per employee paid by *(a)* small and medium enterprises and *(b)* large companies in the last year for which figures are available. [14805]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not held by the Department.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much revenue was raised by the uniform business rate in the last year for which figures are available. [14886]

Mr. Raynsford: Total contributions paid into the non-domestic rating pool for distribution back to local authorities was £11,471 million for 1995–96, the last year for which figures are available.

Street Trees

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce an environmental impact appraisal system to assess the damage to trees on streets caused by *(a)* utility trenching, *(b)* roadworks, and *(c)* traffic disruption. [14726]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have no plans to introduce a general requirement for environmental appraisal in relation to street trees. However, in accordance with the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (85/337/EEC), certain projects undertaken by utilities and highway authorities require such assessment where they are judged likely to have significant effects on the environment. In such cases, the developer must provide an Environmental Statement which includes, amongst other things, a description of any likely significant effects on trees and other flora.

Manufactured Sucrose Polymers

Dr. Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what investigations he has undertaken into the environmental consequences of the entry of manufactured sucrose polymers into the Untied Kingdom food chain. [14937]

Angela Eagle: As far as I am aware, no investigations have been undertaken by this Department into the environmental consequences of the entry of manufactured sucrose polymers into the United Kingdom food chain.

Green Belt

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the requirement for areas which consist mainly of green belt land to take their full quota of the requirement for new homes. [14763]

Mr. Raynsford: Government polices encourage local authorities to make full and effective use of land within existing urban areas. The Government have a national target of 50 per cent. of all new housing to be built on previously used land.

The Government's Green Belt policies remain as set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note 2. There is a presumption against inappropriate development in the Green Belt, except where there are very special circumstances justifying the proposal which outweigh the harm to the Green Belt. PPG2 emphasises that, once fixed, Green Belt boundaries should be changed only in exceptional circumstances. Any such changes proposed by a local planning authority would need to be subject to full public consultation. They must be advertised for a period of six weeks, during which anyone may lodge an objection. The planning authority have to consider all the objections and representations made to them. An inquiry must then be held, unless none of the objectors wish to take part. In addition my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minster would need to be satisfied that all opportunities for development within the urban areas contained by or beyond the Green Belt had been fully considered.

A40 (Cheltenham)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will exempt from the trunk road review the scheme to detrunk the A40 through Cheltenham; and if he will make a statement. [14903]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The consultation exercise at present taking place as part of the trunk road review specifically invites views on the size and role of the network and whether some trunk roads should be transferred to local authorities or vice versa. In these circumstances I think that I would be premature to proceed with consideration of a specific proposal, such as detrunking the A40 through Cheltenham, before we have concluded the review.

Housing Corporation

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the directors of the Housing Corporation, indicating the tenure of their directorships, their remuneration and the qualifications which led to their appointments. [14730]

Mr. Raynsford: In making appointments to the Board of the Housing Corporation, candidates are sought who, in addition to their individual areas of expertise and knowledge, are able to take a broad view of housing policy and related issues. Candidates should be able to contribute usefully in directing a major Non-Departmental Public Body and to make constructive contributions to the development of social housing policy at the national level. The Board needs members with a range of skills and expertise extending from knowledge of finance and regulation to an understanding of how housing policy impacts on other areas of social welfare.

Council Houses, Bromsgrove

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much more of its own reserves Bromsgrove district council will be permitted to spend on council house improvements in the current financial year and in each of the next three years under the terms set out in the Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill. [14762]

Mr. Raynsford: The Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Act 1997 provides for a local authority's set-aside capital receipts to be taken into account when Supplementary Credit Approvals are distributed. The Act underpins the Government's Capital Receipts Initiative under which Bromsgrove District Council is entitled to receive Supplementary Credit Approvals to the value of £188,000 in 1997–98, and £564,000 in 1998–99. These resources may be used to support housing and housing associated regeneration works. In the first instance, however, it is for individual councils to decide on priorities in their area. Longer-term funding arrangements under the Initiative are being considered in our Comprehensive Spending Review.

Nuclear Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the transposition of European Council directive 96/29/Euratom on basic radiation safety standards on the current nuclear waste management strategy of the United Kingdom. [14715]

Angela Eagle: Directive 96/29/Euratom lays down basic safety standards for the health protection of the general public and workers against the dangers of ionising radiation. It updates standards set for these areas by previous Directives. The new Directive is required to be implemented into United Kingdom law by 13 May 2000. The precise manner of implementation is currently being considered by Government.

Housing Associations

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many housing associations have been registered by the Housing Corporation since May 1992; and what proportion of them were housing co-operatives. [14709]

Mr. Raynsford: Since May 1992 a total of 163 social landlords have been registered with the Housing Corporation; 16 per cent. (26) of these were housing co-operatives.

Drink-Driving

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce a lower permitted maximum alcohol blood level for drivers of road vehicles. [15038]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We are currently considering a number of measures to combat drink-driving, including the case for reducing the present maximum permitted blood-alcohol level for drivers.

Derelict Sites

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates he has made, by county, of the number of derelict sites in England; and how many of these sites were formerly used for (i) sport and (ii) recreation. [15155]

Mr. Raynsford: The latest information is from a survey of derelict land undertaken in 1993, which provides estimates of the area of derelict land by type of dereliction at county and district level. This information is included in Table 5 of "*Survey of Derelict Land in England 1993 Volume 2—Reference Tables*", a copy of which is in the House of Commons Library. There is no information available on the number of derelict sites at county level.

Derelict land is defined as

"land so damaged by industrial or other development that it is incapable of beneficial use without treatment".

It is unlikely that sites formerly used for sport and recreation would fall under this definition, and such sites were not separately classified within the types of dereliction recorded.

The Department's Land Use Change Statistics for England show that from 1985 to 1992, some 640 hectares of land previously used for outdoor recreation, or leisure and recreational buildings, became vacant or derelict. However, in some cases this will have been an intermediate stage before redevelopment.

Rail Grants

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the breakdown was by region of *(a)* freight facilities grants and *(b)* track access grants in the most recent available year; and if he will make a statement. [15313]

It is not possible to allocate track access grants to specific regions since the grant aided traffic traverses more than one region and, in one case, all regions. Awards of track access grant are paid over a number of years; in 1996–97 £12.3 million was paid to five claimants.

The Government are committed to encouraging greater take-up of grants from all regions.

Ms Glenda Jackson: In the 1996–97 financial year seven rail and one inland waterways freight facilities grants were awarded in England:

Region	*Number of awards*	*Value of awards* £
East Midlands	2 (rail)	1,335,472
Yorkshire and Humber	2 (rail)	509,787
North West	1 (rail)	230,805
North East	1 (rail)	402,029
London	1 (rail)	1,904,032
South East	1 (Inland Waterways grant)	47,338

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the total amount of money available is under the home energy efficiency scheme in the current winter to help meet the cost of loft, tank and pipe insulation, draught proofing and energy advice; [15177]

(2) what is the maximum award available under the home energy efficiency scheme. [15176]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme helps vulnerable families keep warmer and use less energy by paying grant, to a maximum of £315, towards the cost of improving the

energy efficiency standards of their homes. The measures available are loft insulation, cavity wall insulation, controls for heating systems, draught proofing, energy efficient lamps and water tank insulation. In addition, personal advice on energy use is offered. The scheme is open to householders who receive income-related benefits, disability allowances or are aged 60 or over; £75.1 million has been allocated to it in 1997–98. Expenditure is spread evenly throughout the year for maximum efficiency. I shall review the scheme shortly to check that it is helping the people who need it most. I will also ensure that it complements effectively the home insulation schemes to assist pensioners which I expect to emerge from our Capital receipts and Environment Task Force initiatives.

Landfill Sites

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the landfill sites where disposal of *(a)* clinical waste, *(b)* radioactive waste and *(c)* special waste is permitted, and where no liner is in place within the landfill site. [14525]

Angela Eagle: Site licences and supporting information is available on the public register. The information is not available in the form requested. However, the Environment Agency is undertaking work to provide a fuller response, and I will write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Baker: To aske the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many landfill sites have been in operation in England in each of the last 10 years; and how many, in each year, have operated with no liner in place on all part of the site. [14526]

Angela Eagle: There are currently a total of 1,838 sites of which 256 are notes as lined or leachate managed and 1,582 where liner and leachate management is not mentioned. Some of these sites may, however, be lined or leachate managed. Data for site licences prior to 1997 are also publicly available, but additional time would be needed to undertake the numerical analysis as these data were originally collected by the individual waste regulation authorities—prior to the establishment of the Environment Agency in April 1996. The information could not, therefore, be obtained other than at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions at what percentage of landfill sites in England the methane produced is used to feed electricity into the national grid. [14530]

Angela Eagle: The Environment Agency is responsible for waste regulation in England and Wales. Separate figures are not immediately available for England. However, 499 landfill sites in England and Wales accept significant amounts of biodegradable waste which will generate methane; 108 of these sites extract the methane gas and flare it; 52 sites utilise the methane they extract to produce electricity. This represents 10.4 per cent. of the sites that are capable of producing methane.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what circumstances landfill sites are allowed to operate with no liner. [14531]

Angela Eagle: Any planning permission or site licence granted for landfill in the past 10 years will have been based on a site specific risk assessment, which will have established the need for, and specification and performance standard of, a liner system. This accords with the guidance provided in Waste Management Paper 26B. There will be examples where the risk assessment confirms that no liner or specific containment system is necessary in order to achieve the required environmental protection. In these cases the site can operate without a liner. Considerations will include the nature of the wastes and prediction of degradation processes (inert or biodegradable wastes), site characteristics (natural clay containment of fissured limestone) and proposed after use. The approach is therefore based on the concept of deriving design performance standards through the use of probabilistic risk assessment, to estimate an acceptable impact on the surrounding environment.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the total waste disposal in each year since 1986 (i) in absolute terms and (ii) per head of population and *(b)* the percentage of waste in each year since 1986 which has been (1) landfilled, (2) incinerated and (3) recycled. [14527]

Angela Eagle: Annually updated information has not been collated centrally on a regular basis for the disposal of all controlled waste streams. Best estimates of the proportion of controlled wastes, excluding sewage sludge and dredged spoils going to each of the main waste management options in 1990 are given in the table:

Type of waste	*Landfill*	*Incineration*	*Recycled/re-used*
Household	90	5	5
Commercial	85	7.5	7.5
Construction and demolition	63	0	30
Other industrial	73	1	18
Total	70	2	21

In a new survey of household and municipal waste carried out by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Welsh Office, local authorities in England and Wales reported that 83 per cent. of municipal waste was disposed of to landfill, almost 10 per cent. was incinerated, about half of that with energy recovery and about 7 per cent. was recycled.

Information on the disposal of sewage sludge is published annually in the "Digest of Environmental Statistics". Typically in recent years approximately 10 per cent. of sewage sludge was disposed of to landfill and around 5 per cent. was incinerated. A further 8 to 10 per cent. was used beneficially in land reclamation and soil and compost products.

Recycling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy in respect of mandatory deposits on containers. [14528]

Angela Eagle: The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 were introduced earlier this year to implement the requirements of Directive 94/62/EC on Packaging and Packaging Waste, including the achievement of the recovery and recycling targets it sets down. Based on the "polluter pays" principle, the UK Regulations therefore place obligations on producers of packaging waste to ensure the recovery and recycling of a proportion of the UK's packaging waste to meet a minimum recovery target (including recycling) of 50 per cent. and minimum recycling targets for each material of 15 per cent. by 2001.

Deposit and return systems are one means by which producers of packaging can ensure access to reusable or recoverable packaging in order to discharge their obligations under the Regulations. However, the Government has no plans to make this mandatory.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the net environmental impact of using new as against recycled paper. [14532]

Angela Eagle: There is a substantial amount of research into this issue. We shall be assessing the results of this research in due course.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what discussions he has had with *(a)* manufacturer and *(b)* retailers to encourage the reuse of containers; [14533]

(2) what discussions he had with burger retailers in respect of the environmental impact caused by burger containers. [14534]

Angela Eagle: Since 1993, there have been extensive discussions with the packaging industry and with businesses using packaging to devise a system for achieving higher levels of recovery and recycling of packaging waste.

In July 1993 the previous Government launched their Producer Responsibility challenge to industry to find ways of increasing the amount of waste being recovered in the UK. Throughout 1995, the then Department of the Environment consulted widely on seven industry options for the form of a legal obligation on businesses to recover and recycle packaging waste. After much debate, the former Government accepted that the shared approach put forward in the industry agreement of 15 December 1995 was the option that attracted the broadest industry consensus. Following consultation between July and September 1996, the then Secretary of State for the Environment—right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer)—laid draft Regulations before Parliament, and on 6 March 1997 the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997 came into force.

Under these Regulations, businesses are required to recover and recycle specified tonnages of packaging waste based on the amount of packaging handled by the business in the previous calendar year. Businesses can meet their obligations on their own or by joining a business-led compliance scheme and six compliance schemes have so far been registered with the Environment Agencies to help businesses meet their obligations.

The Regulations place three main obligations on certain businesses which manufacture packaging raw materials, convert materials into packaging, fill packaging with goods or sell packaging. Importers are also obliged. Thus, retailing businesses, including burger retailers, will be required to assess the tonnage of packaging handled by their business and calculate a tonnage obligation which they must recover; they must also recycle a minimum tonnage of each material. Because the obligation is tonnage-based, businesses have a strong cost incentive to minimise the amount of packaging that they use as well as to minimise the amount of packaging waste.

The Regulations include an incentive to re-use packaging by allowing businesses to leave out of the calculation of their obligations any tonnage of packaging that they are re-using. Packaging which is used for the first time will attract recovery and recycling obligations. By re-using containers, businesses will be able to reduce the tonnage of packaging waste which they are required to recover and recycle and thus also reduce their costs.

I recently announced that a Producer Responsibility Forum is being set up to provide a broader forum for those who are affected by the Regulations to come and discuss various issues of interest. This will being together, for example, business, local authorities, the waste industry and the Environment Agencies.

The Government have supported the case for periodic review of the Regulations. My right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher) has therefore announced his proposals for a two staged review of the Regulations—Departmental News Release number 204. Further discussions will therefore be continuing with manufacturer, fillers, retailers and importers of packaging, as well as others affected by the Regulations.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evaluation he has made of the length of journey by car from home to recycling point which negates the environmental benefit of recycling the average amount recycled per journey, assuming recycling to be the only purpose of each journey. [14536]

Angela Eagle: Circumstances affecting the degree of environmental benefit from recycling vary throughout the country. Determining the length of journey which negates this effect is therefore an extremely complex matter. Any average figure given would almost certainly be incorrect for any one particular situation.

There have been a number of studies into this question that have employed Life Cycle Analysis and Economic Valuation techniques. One such study from Coopers and Lybrand, for example, found that on average a 10 per cent. increase in the distance of a car journey to the bring site reduced the environmental benefits of recycling by 0.7 per cent. However, the number of assumptions made to arrive at this conclusion are considerable.

The Government are keen to encourage the development of a network of recycling points and kerbside collection schemes such that special car journeys are rendered unnecessary. The target in Making Waste Work is that there should be easily accessible recycling facilities for 80 per cent. of households by 2000.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the percentages of *(a)* glass, *(b)* paper, *(c)* aluminium cans and *(d)* steel cans recycled in each European Union country for each year from 1986 to date. [14537]

Angela Eagle: Figures for paper and glass from 1986 to 1995, from the OECD Environmental Data Report, 1997 are set out in the attached tables. However, definitions may vary from one country to another and the figures may not be directly comparable. In particular, the recycling rates may be based on total amounts of waste produced, rather than total apparent consumption.

Published figures for aluminium and steel cans are not readily available.

Glass recycling rates for EC countries and Norway

Percentage of apparent consumption

	1986	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Austria	39	44	—	—	—	60	64	68	76	76
Belgium	44	39	—	—	—	55	54	55	67	67
Denmark	32	32	—	—	—	35	48	64	67	63
Finland	—	25	—	—	36	31	44	46	50	50
France	28	26	—	29	29	41	44	46	48	50
Germany	45	49	49	53	54	61	60	65	75	75
Greece	—	—	—	—	15	17	20	20	—	—
Ireland	8	8	—	—	23	23	27	29	31	39
Italy	26	38	—	—	48	53	53	52	54	53
Luxembourg	No information available									
Netherlands	49	50	52	55	67	70	73	76	77	80
Portugal	13	14	14	24	27	30	30	29	32	42
Spain	20	22	—	—	27	27	27	29	31	32
Sweden	—	—	22	22	—	44	58	59	56	61
UK	—	14	14	17	21	21	26	29	28	27

Paper and card recycling rates for EC countries and Norway

Percentage of apparent consumption

	1986	*1987*	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Austria	—	—	—	—	37	—	—	—	66	65
Belgium	14	14	—	—	—	—	—	—	14	12
Denmark	30	29	30	30	35	35	36	46	43	44
Finland	—	—	—	40	41	—	48	46	43	57
France	34	35	34	34	34	34	34	36	36	38
Germany	42	42	43	44	44	47	50	55	59	67
Greece	—	—	—	—	28	29	30	30	20	19
Ireland	6	11	—	—	—	—	—	—	13	12
Italy	25	27	27	26	27	28	28	30	28	29
Luxembourg	No information available									
Netherlands	53	57	59	48	50	53	58	53	67	77
Portugal	—	—	42	39	41	41	39	38	39	37
Spain	55	54	54	51	51	—	47	49	48	52
Sweden	—	—	—	—	43	46	—	50	57	54
UK	27	27	26	28	35	36	35	33	36	35

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his decision in respect of the appeal by Orange PCS Ltd. for a telecommunications mast on land at Gun Hill Industrial Estate, Dedham (Ref. COL/96/1259) if he will make a statement on its compatibility with planning guidance for masts in or near areas of outstanding natural beauty and other sensitive areas. [15349]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend issued his decision allowing a telecommunications mast at Gun Hill, Essex, on 28 October 1997. The reasons for allowing the appeal were set out in the decision letter, which was sent to the hon. Gentleman. These decisions took into account the relevant policies in the Essex Structure Plan and the Colchester Borough Local Plan and current guidance set out in Planning Policy Guidance Notes 7 and 8, relating to development in the countryside and the provision of telecommunications facilities.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the adequacy of planning guidance on telecommunications masts in respect of protection afforded to sensitive areas such as areas of outstanding natural beauty. [15348]

Mr. Raynsford: Current planning policy guidance on telecommunications development is set out in planning policy guidance note 8—PPG8 revised. That guidance reflects our general policy of facilitating the growth of new and existing telecommunications systems while

protecting the environment. Those objectives include the protection of the countryside and urban areas, especially designated areas such as National Parks, areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and conservation areas.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many mobile telecommunications masts have been constructed in *(a)* the Borough of Colchester and *(b)* Tendring District. [15347]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not collected centrally. However, the Government consider it desirable that the number of telecommunications masts is kept to a minimum. Wherever possible, we would wish to see good use made of existing masts and other structures for the installation of new antennas.

Ancient Woodland

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the percentages of each county covered by ancient woodland in *(a)* 1986 and *(b)* 1996 or other available years. [14535]

Angela Eagle: Figures held by English Nature, showing the change in percentage cover of ancient woodland by Count, since 1930, are as follows (figures are not available for 1986):

County	*County area sq km*	*c1930 percentage cover*	*1996 percentage cover*
Avon	1,360	2.64	2.28
Bedfordshire	1,217	1.94	2.12
Berkshire	1,296	5.16	4.50
Buckinghamshire	1,839	4.77	4.29
Cambridgeshire	3,382	1.03	0.84
Cheshire	2,280	0.87	0.72
Cleveland	649	2.52	2.46
Cornwall	3,652	2.01	1.89
Cumbria	6,762	2.41	2.29
Derbyshire	2,675	1.82	1.67
Devon	6,655	2.25	2.23
Dorset	2,627	3.06	2.94
Durham	2,383	1.54	1.69
East Sussex	1,786	10.77	10.40
Essex	3,682	2.62	2.35
Gloucestershire	2,611	6.52	6.73
Greater London	1,579	1.78	1.57
Greater Manchester	1,391	0.61	0.61
Hampshire	3,689	7.84	6.90
Hereford and Worcester	3,870	4.97	4.70
Hertfordshire	1,598	3.73	3.31
Humberside	3,405	0.18	0.16
Isle of Wight	392	3.85	4.14
Kent	3,650	9.32	7.85
Lancashire	3,007	0.94	0.90
Leicestershire	2,493	1.06	1.01
Lincolnshire	5,987	1.09	1.04
Merseyside	661	0.19	0.17
Norfolk	5,323	0.54	0.51
North Yorkshire	8,240	1.70	1.67
Northamptonshire	2,361	3.25	2.75
Northumberland	5,031	1.02	0.96
Nottinghamshire	2,140	1.05	0.96
Oxfordshire	2,553	3.14	2.83
Shropshire	3,516	3.16	2.66
Somerset	3,495	3.01	2.64
South Yorkshire	1,631	3.50	2.85
Staffordshire	2,571	2.50	2.15
Suffolk	3,781	1.28	1.13
Surrey	1,677	6.71	5.75
Tyne and Wear	610	2.31	2.01
Warwickshire	2,006	2.02	2.14
West Midlands	897	1.31	0.81
West Sussex	1,979	8.40	8.49
West Yorkshire	1,981	1.75	1.67
Wiltshire	3,490	3.80	3.65

Air Quality

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to implement the National Air Quality Strategy. [15741]

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to announce that the Air Quality Regulations 1997 have been laid today. These regulations will set the National Air Quality Strategy objectives in statutory form and initiate the system of local air quality management under Part IV of the Environment Act 1995. I also announced in July that this Government would initiate an immediate review of the National Air Quality Strategy. This review will look at all aspects of the Strategy, including the objectives themselves and the measures required to meet them.

DEFENCE

Military Training and Equipment

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Kenyan Government meet the criteria established to assess the suitability of overseas security forces to receive military training and military equipment from the United Kingdom. [15200]

Dr. Reid: The Kenyan armed forces satisfy the criteria used to determine the suitability of overseas security forces to receive military training from the United Kingdom. Any application for a licence to export defence equipment to Kenya would, as for all countries, be considered on a case-by-case basis and in accordance with the Government's export criteria which were announced by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, column*65-66*.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the list of those countries qualifying to receive military training and equipment from the United Kingdom is to be reviewed to take account of the Government's ethical foreign policy. [15201]

Dr. Reid: The review of the list of countries qualifying to receive military training will take account of the Government's ethical foreign policy. The list relates solely to military assistance. Applications for the export of defence equipment to all countries are considered in accordance with the Government's export criteria, announced by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *65-66*.

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment is made of potential future human rights violations by overseas Governments applying for military training or equipment from the United Kingdom before such applications are granted. [15199]

Dr. Reid: The possibility of the training requested leading to human rights violations is one of the factors taken into account in considering whether such applications should be granted. In the case of conventional arms exports, licence applications are considered taking into account respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the recipient country. An export licence will not be issued if there is a clearly identifiable risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on official hospitality for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997. [15266]

Dr. Reid: The request for figures on hospitality expenditure before 1992–93 can be provided only at disproportionate cost. The figures for total expenditure for the years 1992–93 to 30 September 1997 are listed below:

	£ million
(i) 1992–93	4.952
(ii) 1993–94	4.577
(iii) 1994–95	4.867
(iv) 1995–96	4.949
(v) 1996–97	5.327
(vI) 1 May 1997 to 30 September 1997	2.034

These figures reflect expenditure incurred by my Department, the establishments and formations of the Armed Forces at home and abroad, and by individual officers occupying Command and international appointments for which entertainment allowances were payable. Entertainment expenditure for agencies and non-departmental public bodies are included in these figures and are not held separately.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on overseas travel for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997; and if he will provide a breakdown to show (1) air fares and (2) other expenditure relating to overseas travel. [15267]

Dr. Reid: This information is not held centrally and could be provided, if at all, only at disproportionate cost.

SCOTLAND

University Students

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many students domiciled in England or funded by English education authorities are currently studying for first degrees in Scottish universities. [13870]

Mr. Wilson: The latest year for which published figures are available is 1994–95. In that year, 16,793 English domiciled students were studying for a first degree in a Scottish University or College. Of these, 16,649 were studying full-time and 144 were studying part-time.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what consultations he has had with *(a)* English education authorities, *(b)* student representative organisations and *(c)* universities about his proposal to charge students from England attending Scottish universities higher tuition fees than students from Scotland or from other EU countries. [13871]

Mr. Wilson: I invited comments on the Dearing and Garrick reports on 23 July, including comments on Garrick recommendation 29 which covers the issue of tuition fees for comparable qualifications. Since then, responses have been received from student representative organisations, amongst others, and the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals, whom I have also met. I have had extensive discussion with Ministerial colleagues in the Department of Education and Employment, and my announcement on Monday 27 October with regard to tuition fees was the agreed position of the Government.

Dounreay Nuclear Plant

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had about the discharge authorisations for the Dounreay nuclear site; with whom the discussions took place; and what the outcome is of such discussions. [14284]

Mr. Chisholm: In the first instance it is for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to determine the terms of the discharge authorisations for the Dounreay Nuclear site. In March 1997 SEPA consulted the then Secretary of State on the terms of revised discharge authorisations which it proposed to grant. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State subsequently noted that the authorisations which SEPA proposed to make differed significantly from those on which the initial consultation was based. In August he therefore asked SEPA to conduct a further round of consultation based on the authorisations it is minded to grant, to ensure that the widest range of views is obtained. Arrangements to conduct this fresh round of consultation are now well advanced.

My right hon. Friend has not held discussions with other parties about the discharge authorisations.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Visas

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what, at 1 October, was the average waiting time for *(a)* visas and *(b)* interviews relating to visa applications in respect of United Kingdom posts at (i) Bombay, (ii) Islamabad, (iii) New Delhi, (iv) Calcutta, (v) Karachi, (vi) Dhaka, (vii) Washington, (viii) New York, (ix) Da-es-Salaam, (x) Nairobi and (xi) Lagos. [14237]

Mr. Fatchett: Entry clearance posts in the Indian sub-continent receive a heavy volume of applications to join families in the United Kingdom. People applying for an indefinite stay, known as "settlement", are divided into separate queues for interview. This allows posts to deal more quickly with those who may have a claim to compassionate treatment.

The information my hon. Friend requested is as follows:

Post	*Waiting time for a straight forward visit application*	*Waiting time if an interview is required for a visit visa*	*Waiting time for a settlement interview*
Bombay	same day	same day	Q1 same day Q2 2 months Q3 2 months Q4 5 months
Islamabad	same day	22 days	Q1 5 months Q2 5 months Q3 6 months Q4 9 months
New Delhi	same day	same day	Q1 same day Q2 2.5 months Q3 3.5 months Q4 4.5 months
Calcutta	same day	5 days	7 days
Karachi	same day	15 days	9 weeks
Dhaka	same day	same day	Q1 3 months Q2 3 months Q3 3 months Q4 9.5 months
Washington	same day	1 day	2 days
New York	same day	4 days	same day
Dar-es-Salaam	same day	2–3 days	2–3 days
Nairobi	same day	6 days	24 days
Lagos	same day	11 days	5 months

The queue groupings are:

Q1—Spouses and children under 18 of British citizens; elderly relatives; (maximum waiting time—3 months).

Q2—Spouses and children of non-British citizens; (maximum waiting time—3 months).

Q3—Fiance(e)s and other first time applicants (maximum waiting time—6 months).

Q4—Re-applicants (maximum waiting time—9 months).

Ethnic Minorities

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the open day held by his Department in order to recruit more members of the ethnic minority community to join the Foreign Office. [14229]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We were delighted to welcome more than 900 members of the public to this Department's Open Day on 19 September. Many young people from all over Britain attended; some had travelled form the Orkney Islands. They fully represented the diversity of modern Britain: ethnic minorities; people with disabilities; students from a variety of schools; careers advisers; religious and community leaders. non-governmental organisations and pressure groups representing a broad range of the interests of the people of the UK, at home and overseas, also joined us.

Our purpose in opening up this Department was to show what the Department does.

It is our intention to project this Department as a professional, modern and friendly organisation which works hard to represent the interests of the British people overseas and not the forbidding and stuffy place of popular myth. We hope that young women and men, from all communities and social backgrounds, will consider coming to work with us at this Department, helping us to make it an organisation which is truly representative of all the people of the UK.

The Open Day was a huge success. In September alone there was a 274 per cent. increase in the average monthly recruitment enquiries and this Department's monthly careers briefings are fully booked for months ahead.

We intend to make Open Days a regular feature in this Department's calendar of events.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to raise the Middle Eastern Peace Process with particular reference to resolving the refugee issue, during the United Kingdom Presidency of the European Union. [14474]

Mr. Fatchett: The Palestinian refugee issue is to be resolved in direct final status negotiations between Israelis and palestinians. We recognise the importance of finding a mutually acceptable solution to the issue as part of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace agreement. We are considering what contribution we can make during our Presidency to support efforts to resolve this issue.

Montserrat

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people are currently living in communal shelters in Montserrat; and if he will make a statement. [14998]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As at the morning of 6 November, there were 783 people living in communal shelters.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many new homes are currently being built on the island of Montserrat; and if he will make a statement. [14999]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Contractors employed by the Department for International Development have recently completed 50 new houses at Davy Hill. Work is underway at Lookout on another 50 which should be completed in late December.

Also available to Montserratians are Government funded, self-help financial assistance schemes to build or complete their own properties. These schemes are administered by the Government of Montserrat and numbers of participants are not known, although £342,000 has been provided to date under the materials assistance project.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many migrants from Montserrat are currently in the United Kingdom; how many entered in (i) June, (ii) July, (iii) August and (iv) September; and if he will make a statement. [15001]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Figures are not available in the precise form requested. Under the voluntary evacuation scheme which began in April 1996, a total of 1,049 Montserratians had entered the UK by 3 July 1997; a total of 1,291 had come by 28 July, and by 1 September a total of 1,715 had arrived. Following the introduction of an assisted passage scheme, a further 635 Montserratians arrived in the UK in September. We estimate that there are currently around 3,000 in the UK.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many patients are currently being cared for in the temporary hospital in Montserrat; what are the hospital's sanitation arrangements; and if he will make a statement. [15000]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There are currently five patients in the acute ward and a further 37 elderly persons cared for in the Margetson Memorial Home. A community services unit on the same site accommodates approximately 30 elderly or disabled persons evacuated from their homes.

The sanitation system at the temporary hospital was not designed for such heavy use. As part of an ongoing programme of major works at the hospital, the Department for International Development is spending approximately £150,000 on improvements to sanitation.

Dependent Territories

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the current review of the status of Britain's dependent territories will be completed; and if he will make a statement. [14988]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We hope to complete the review to coincide with the Dependent Territories Association Conference scheduled to take place in London on 4 February of next year.

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who will be responsible for drawing up the review of Britain's dependent territories; and if Governments of the dependent territories themselves will be invited to make submissions. [14990]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are responsible for drawing up the review, consulting other Ministries and Governments of Dependent Territories. The Government of Gibraltar were already considering proposals for constitutional change before we announced this review. We will therefore be looking at these proposals separately.

Iraq

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many members of the current UNISCOM Inspection Team in Iraq are from the United Kingdom; and if he will indicate their qualifications for being part of the UNISCOM team. [14712]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There are currently 11 UK personnel serving with the UN Special Commission in Baghdad. All have been provided in response to specific requests from the Special Commission for people with the skills required in the Special Commission's work—for example, an understanding of biological or chemical weapons technology.

Amsterdam Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which Minister of the Crown signed the treaty of Amsterdam; and if he will list the topics of each declaration made by Her Majesty's Government, or to which they are a party, indicating dates on which these were published, and place of publication. [15058]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I signed the Treaty of Amsterdam on behalf of the Crown. The United Kingdom participated in the 51 Declarations adopted by the Conference and annexed to the Final Act of the Conference. Those Declarations are listed, and reproduced, in a Command Paper—Cm 3780—which was published on 29 October 1997.

European Courts

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 27 October, *Official Report*, column *665*, if he will list those articles of the signed version of the treaty of Amsterdam, and those of the provisional version (CONF 4001/97) published on 19 June, which will require referral by courts and tribunals of member states of the European Union to the Court of Justice of the European Community

in Luxembourg, broken down into those which are *(a)* part of and *(b)* not part of the area of freedom, security and justice provided for in the provisional version above. [15034]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Except as set out in (ii) below, no article of the Treaty of Amsterdam requires courts and tribunals of Member States to refer questions to the European Court of Justice.

In the Area of Freedom Security and Justice: (i) Member States are given the option under Title VI of the Treaty on European Union to accept the jurisdiction of the ECJ to give preliminary rulings on measures adopted under this Title. (ii) under Article 73p of the new title IIIa of the EC Treaty (draft Article H in the preliminary version CONF 4001/97), Member States' courts of last instance may in some circumstances be required to refer to the ECJ.

In other areas, there is no modification of the arrangements for preliminary rulings set out in Article 77 of the EC Treaty.

European Court of Justice

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the United Kingdom Government have made on the Swedish Government's failure to nominate Judge Briton Sundberg-Weitman for appointment to the European Court of Justice. [15281]

Mr. Doug Henderson: None.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will seek a review of the procedure for the appointment of judges to the European Court of Justice to ensure appointments are made on the basis of competence and do not discriminate against women and ethnic minorities. [15282]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No. Appointments to the European Court of Justice are made in accordance with Article 167 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, which states that:

"The Judges and Advocates-General shall be chosen from persons whose independence is beyond doubt and who possess the highest judicial offices in their respective countries or who are jurisconsults of recognized competence; they shall be appointed by common accord of the governments of the Member States for a term of six years."

So far as UK appointments are concerned, our policy is to nominate the best qualified candidate, regardless of ethnic origin, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, political affiliation or, subject to the physical requirements of the office, disability.

Correspondence

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead dated 24 April, 17 June and 23 September; what is his Department's standard for response times to letters from hon. Members; and if he will make a statement. [15624]

Mr. Fatchett: The letters referred to by my hon. Friend were answered on 7 November 1997. As to my Department's response times to letters from hon. Members I would refer my hon. Friend to the replies I gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) and for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 4 November, *Official Report*, column *166–67*.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list each of the overseas trips made by himself and other members of his ministerial team since 2 May, specifying in each case *(a)* the participating Minister or Ministers, *(b)* the destination of the trip, *(c)* the purpose of the trip and *(d)* the cost of the trip; and if he will make a statement. [15216]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The information is in the following table:

Date	*Venue*	*Purpose of visit*	*Total cost £*
May			
7[1]	Germany, France	Bilateral	5,550
12–13	France	WEU Ministerial	5,480
18–20	USA, Netherlands[1]	Bilateral	33,040
23	Netherlands	Special European Council	7,638
June			
2	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council	19,692
	Italy	Bilateral	
5–6[1]	Sweden	European Socialist Meeting	4,669
16–17[1]	Netherlands	European Council	11,347
20–22	USA (Denver and	G7 Summit and UN	
22–23	New York)	Special Session on Environment	128,312 15,750
27–1 July[2]	Hong Kong	Handover	89,777
July			
7–9	Spain	NATO Summit	34,443
13–15	Russian Federation	Bilateral	34,017
22[1]	Belgium	General Affairs Council/ Inter-Governmental Conference	3,717
27–29	Bosnia, Croatia	Bilateral	18,172
August			
26–1 September	Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore	Bilateral	191,241
September			
9	Germany	Bilateral	7,313
14–15[1]	Belgium	General Affairs Council	7,486
21–26[1]	USA	United Nations General Assembly	102,609
October			
6–9	Pakistan	In attendance upon	
12–15	India	Her Majesty The Queen	16,206
November			
3	Ireland	Bilateral	4,796
9–10	Belgium	General Affairs	7,500

[1] Accompanied by Mr. D. Henderson MP.
[2] Accompanied by Mr. D. Fatchett MP.

FCO Ministers undertook the following overseas visits during the same period:

Date	Venue	Purpose of visit	Total cost £
(i) Mr. T Lloyd MP			
May			
8	Netherlands	Chemical Weapon Convention Conference	758
26–27	France	OECD Ministerial Meeting	1,009
June			
23–25	South Africa, Uganda, Kenya	Bilateral	11,806
July			
21–22	USA	Bilateral	8,251
August			
3–6	Democratic Republic EU Troika Visit of Congo		7,650
September			
10–11	France	Council of Europe	1,993
14–24	Colombia/Brazil	Bilateral	5,842
28–31	FRY Bosnia	Bilateral	9,454
(ii) Mr. D. Henderson MP			
May			
5–6	Belgium	Inter-Governmental Conference	1,712.03
16	Netherlands	Informal Personal Representatives Meeting	2,044.42
26–28	Belgium	Informal Personal Reps Meeting	887.21
June			
11–12	Spain	Bilateral	2,245
20–21	Ireland	Bilateral	254
26	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council	4,404
July			
15–16	France	European Parliament Plenary	1,060
August			
5–8	Greece	Bilateral	1,950
October			
1–2	Netherlands	Bilateral	842
6	Luxembourg	General Affairs Council	4,632
7–8	Gibraltar	Bilateral	2,144
13–15	Turkey, Istanbul	Bilateral	1,736
20–22	Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria	Bilateral	8,339
25–26	Luxembourg	Informal Foreign Minister's Weekend	2,022
31–2	Italy	Bilateral	1,380
November			
3	Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland	Bilateral	7,444
(iii) Mr. D. Fatchett MP			
May			
25–29	Syria, Lebanon, Jordon, Israel, Palestine	Bilateral	6,521
June			
7–15	India, Pakistan	Bilateral	11,148
21–26	Kuwait, UAE, Oman	Bilateral	9,382
July			
22	Belgium	Bilateral	621
26–30	Malaysia, Brunei	EU/ASEAN Meeting	11,690
September			
2	Luxembourg	EU/India Troika Meeting	787
12–22	Australia, New Zealand, Cook Islands, USA	Bilateral	22,870
(iv) Baroness Symons			
June			
14–19	Trinidad and Tobago, Montserrat, USA	Bilateral	8,138
29–1 July	Montserrat	Bilateral	10,652
September			
16–18	USA	Bilateral	5,077
22–26	India	Bilateral	8,865
October			
6–10	Canada	Bilateral	3,000

TREASURY

European Council

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Council meeting of the Economic and Finance Ministers of the European Union held on 5 November. [15430]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I represented the UK at the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Brussels on 5 November. The Economic Secretary accompanied me.

The Council had only one agenda item to consider, the preparation of the Special Employment Council in Luxembourg later this month. The Council discussed the Commission's draft Employment Guidelines brought forward in response to the Amsterdam European Council's remit.

The Council made progress towards a draft that suited all, and the Presidency has undertaken to draft Conclusions in time for the next ECOFIN on 17 November. There was strong support for the development of Action Plans.

The Council gave broad endorsement to the EIB's plans to assist employment. It also gave a general welcome to the European Parliament's proposed package of EC Budget employment-related spending.

EC (Excessive Deficits)

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the maximum amount that can be levied as a fine in accordance with the amended proposal for the excessive deficit procedure laid down in European Union document 9486/97. [12502]

Mrs. Liddell: According to Council Regulation (EC No. 1467/97, of 7 July 1997, the maximum single fine cannot exceed an upper limit of 0.5 per cent. of GDP. Fines would not apply to Member States that do not participate in the single currency.

Government Statistics

Mr. Soames: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he intends to take to improve the quality and accuracy of Government statistics. [15082]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government places great importance on the quality and reliability of official statistics to guide and monitor policy and to inform the public about social and economic matters. The Government Statistical Service is constantly looking for ways to improve the quality of the statistics produced, within the constraints of available resources. It is vital that official statistics also command widespread public confidence. Accordingly, we shall be taking forward our manifesto commitment to the creation of an independent National Statistical Service, and an announcement will be made in due course.

Windfall Tax

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue raised from the windfall tax *(a)* in total and *(b)* from each of the water and sewerage companies. [15041]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: The windfall tax is expected to raise some £5.2 billion in total, of which water and sewerage companies are expected to pay some £1.65 billion. The liability of individual companies is a confidential matter between them and the tax authorities.

Euro Symbol

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors determined the choice of the euro symbol. [13853]

Mrs. Liddell: The euro symbol was designed by the European Commission services. The final choice was made from a number of alternative designs taking into account a survey of the views of the general public.

Local Authority Pension Schemes (Kent)

Mr. Norman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations she has received on the need to compensate Kent county council and other local authorities in Kent for the cost to local authority pension schemes of the abolition of the payment of tax credits on dividends; what response he has made; and if he will make a statement. [14993]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: I have received a number of representations from local authorities about the effects on local authority pension schemes of the removal of tax credits in respect of Advance Corporation Tax. In my replies, I have explained that the extent to which these changes affect local authority budgets will depend on the overall judgments made by the funds' actuaries as they undertake revaluations due, in England, to take effect from 1999–2000. The Government has told the Local Government Association that it will take all factors into account in determining the level of local authority provision for 1999–2000 and subsequent years.

Financial Regulation

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he last met the Governor of the Bank of England to discuss financial regulation; and when he next plans to do so. [14987]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend often meets the Governor to discuss a range of different subjects.

Single Currency

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 27 October, *Official Report,* column 584, what are the main criteria against which Her Majesty's Government will judge whether a single currency is successful enough for the United Kingdom to seek to join. [14318]

Mrs. Liddell: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has set out the five economic tests that define whether there is a clear and unambiguous economic case for Britain to join the single currency.

These tests are: first, whether there can be sustainable convergence between Britain and the economies of a single currency; secondly, whether there is sufficient flexibility to cope with economic change; thirdly, the effect on investment; fourthly, the impact on our financial services, and finally whether it is good for employment.

Household Statistics

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the percentage of families with dependent children which are *(a)* married couples, *(b)* cohabiting couples and *(c)* lone parent by each type. [14453]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 11 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply, as Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to your recent question about the marital status of adults with dependent children.

This information, taken from the 1996 General Household Survey, is contained in the following table:

Family type and marital status

Families with dependent children	*Great Britain 1996*
	Per cent.[1]
Married couple	70
Cohabiting couple	8
Lone mother	20
single	7
widowed	1
divorced	6
separated	5
Lone father	2
All lone families	21
Base	2,975

[1] Because of rounding some sub-totals differ from the sum of their parts.

Mr. Leigh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the percentage of households headed by a person who is (i) married, (ii) cohabiting, (iii) single, (iv) widowed, (v) divorced, (vi) separated and (vii) cohabiting with someone of the same sex. [14452]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Edward Leigh, dated 11 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply, as Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to your recent question on the marital status of heads of households.

This information, taken from the 1996 General Household Survey, is contained in the following table:

Marital status of head of household

Great Britain 1996

	Per cent.
Married	54
Cohabiting	6
Single	13
Widowed	15
Divorced	8
Separated	3
Same sex cohabiting	[1]—
Base	9,158

[1] Estimated at 0.1 per cent.

Overseas Investment

Mr. Forth: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for *(a)* 1970, *(b)* 1980, *(c)* 1990 and *(d)* the latest available date, the totals for United Kingdom private sector overseas investment in (i) the other European Union countries, (ii) North America and (iii) the rest of the world. [14483]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from John Kidgell to Mr. Eric Forth, dated 11 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked the Director of the Office for National Statistics to reply to your recent question asking for a breakdown of the United Kingdom's private sector overseas investment. The Director has asked me to respond in his absence.

The figures requested are shown in the attached table. They are based on net flows of outward direct investment i.e. where a United Kingdom company has a significant and lasting interest in an enterprise operating overseas. No information is available centrally regarding the geographical breakdown of portfolio overseas.

Overseas direct investment net flows

£ million

Area	*1970*[1]	*1980*[1]	*1990**	*1995**	*1990‡*	*1995‡*
EU (14 countries)	104	486	4,448	8,473	5,103	9,613
North America	185	1,861	1,152	11,092	941	10,523
Rest of the world	257	1,044	3,552	5,536	4,064	5,888

[1] Figures for 1970 and 1980 exclude investment in oil companies. To enable comparison across time, 1990 and 1995 are presented both *excluding and ‡ including oil companies.

Paracetamol (Deaths)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many *(a)* adults and *(b)* children have committed suicide using paracetamol in each of the last 10 years. [14279]

Mrs. Helen Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. James Clappison dated 11 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me, as Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to reply to your recent question asking how many adults and children have committed suicide using paracetamol in each of the last 10 years.

The information is given in the following table.

Deaths (a) from suicide and (b) undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted, where paracetamol is mentioned on the death certificate, England and Wales, 1993–1996

(a) Suicide

	Paracetamol without mention of other drugs			*Paracetamol with mention of other drugs*		
	Age			*Age*		
Year	*0–14*	*15–19*	*20 and over*	*0–14*	*15–19*	*20 and over*
1993	— (—)	— (—)	67 (7)	— (—)	7 (—)	162 (35)
1994	— (—)	— (—)	68 (5)	— (—)	3 (1)	141 (19)
1995	— (—)	1 (—)	75 (2)	1 (—)	3 (—)	141 (17)
1996	—(—)	— (—)	54 (6)	— (—)	7 (—)	153 (16)

(b) Undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted

	Paracetamol without mention of other drugs			*Paracetamol with mention of other drugs*		
	Age			*Age*		
Year	*0–14*	*15–19*	*20 and over*	*0–14*	*15–19*	*20 and over*
1993	— (—)	2 (—)	60 (6)	— (—)	3 (—)	65 (19)
1994	1 (—)	— (—)	51 (5)	1 (1)	3 (—)	91 (21)
1995	— (—)	2 (—)	69 (—)	1 (—)	7 (1)	110 (29)
1996	— (—)	3 (—)	51 (3)	— (—)	4 (—)	90 (19)

The figures in brackets are those deaths where there was a mention of alcohol. These figures are included in the non-bracketed figures.

Data prior to 1993 can be obtained from Tables 10 and 11 *in Mortality statistics: accidents and violence*, series DH4 (1987–89) and Tables 10 and 11 in *Mortality statistics; injury and poisoning*, series DH4 (1990–92). Copies are available in the House of Commons library.

The inclusion of a substance in the above tables (and in Tables 10 and 11) does not imply that it is necessarily toxic; and, where two or more substances are listed together, the contribution, if any, of each to the death is unknown. Even where one substance is listed alone there may well be other factors with an important bearing on the death.

Since 1993, the ONS has held all deaths information electronically. The data were extracted using a "text search" facility, focusing on paracetamol and a list of paracetamol-containing compounds. Although provision was made to take into account spelling errors in the recording of these compounds, the figures should be seen as estimates because it cannot be guaranteed that every single case has been identified. The ONS is actively exploring, with interested parties, ways to improve these data.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many accidental deaths of *(a)* adults and *(b)* children have been caused by paracetamol in each of the last 10 years. [14280]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. James Clappison, dated 11 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me, as Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to reply to your recent question asking how many accidental deaths of adults and children have been caused by paracetamol in each of the last 10 years.

The information requested is shown in the following table.

Deaths from accidental poisoning where paracetamol is mentioned on the death certificate, England and Wales, 1993–96

	Paracetamol without mention of other drugs			*Paracetamol with mention of other drugs*		
	Age			*Age*		
Year	*0–14*	*15–19*	*20 and over*	*0–14*	*15–19*	*20 and over*
1993	— (—)	1 (—)	43 (9)	1 (1)	1 (—)	40 (17)
1994	2 (—)	2 (–)	36 (10)	1 (—)	4 (1)	49 (15)
1995	— (—)	1 (—)	34 (6)	— (—)	2 (1)	46 (20)
1996	1 (—)	3 (1)	36 (5)	— (—)	6 (1)	43 (11)

The figures in brackets are those deaths where there was a mention of alcohol. These figures are included in the non-bracketed figures.

Data prior to 1993 can be obtained from Tables 10 and 11 in *Mortality statistics: accidents and violence, series* DH4 (1987–1989) and Tables 10 and 11 in *Mortality statistics: injury and poisoning*, series DH4 (1990–1992). Copies are available in the House of Commons Library.

The inclusion of a substance in the above table (and in Tables 10 and 11) does not imply that it is necessarily toxic; and, where two or more substances are listed together, the contribution, if any, of each to the death is unknown. Even where one substance is listed alone there may well be other factors with an important bearing on the death.

Since 1993, the ONS has held all deaths information electronically. The data were extracted using a "text search" facility, focusing on paracetamol and a list of paracetamol-containing compounds. Although provision was made to take into account spelling errors in the recording of these compounds, the figures should be seen as estimates because it cannot be guaranteed that every single case has been identified. The ONS is actively exploring, with interested parties, ways to improve these data.

Tax Harmonisation

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his policy on the harmonisation of *(a)* value added tax and *(b)* other indirect taxes in the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [13531]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* The Government, while supportive of efforts to simplify and modernise the current European Community VAT system, is opposed to further unnecessary harmonisation of VAT at the Community level. With regard to the other indirect taxes which are the subject of EC-wide legislation (the excise duties on alcohol and alcoholic beverages, tobacco products and mineral oils), the Government believes that Member States should be free to set these excise duty rates at the levels they feel are appropriate to their own particular circumstances, subject only to the agreed minimum rates. Nevertheless, the Government considers that there should be movement towards the approximation of these excise duty rates across the EC and that some steps in the direction of the UK pattern of indirect taxation make sense.

Income Tax

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the effects on employment of raising the level of the personal income tax allowance by £1,000 per annum; and if he will make a statement. [14519]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* Improving the incentive to work will help increase employment. The Government is currently looking at ways of streamlining and modernising the tax and benefits system to meet the objectives of promoting work incentives, reducing poverty and welfare dependency, and strengthening community and family life. This review includes looking at benefits, tax rates and allowances to find the most effective way to encourage employment and reward work.

Tax Changes

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the cumulative revenue yield for *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99, *(c)* 1999–2000, *(d)* 2000–1 and *(e)* 2001–2 resulting from announced changes to direct and indirect taxation in these years; and if he will make a statement. [13281]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The forecast cumulative revenue yield for 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 for the changes announced in the July 1997 Budget are shown in table 2.2 of the Financial Statement and Budget Report (HC85). Tables 2B.1 and 2B.2 of the same document show the revenue effects of measures announced since the 1996 Budget for these years and of measures announced in 1996 Budget or earlier which take effect after the 1997 Budget. Estimates are not available beyond 1999–2000.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the cumulative revenue yield for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96 and *(e)* 1996–97 from the changes in direct and indirect taxation announced in the budgets over the period from 1992 to 1996; and if he will make a statement. [13282]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* For each budget the forecast cumulative revenue yield of changes for 1992–93 to 1996–97 are given in the Financial Statement and Budget Reports (March 1992 tables 4.1, 4A.1 (covering 1992–93 and 1993–94), March 1993 tables 4.1, 4B.1, (1993–94 to 1995–96), November 1993 tables 4.1 annex B to chapter 4 first table (1994–95 to 1996–97), November 1994 tables 5.1, 5B.1 (1995–96 to 1997–98), November 1995 tables 5.1, 5B.1, November 1996 Annex A to chapter 6 first table). The outturn revenue yield of the announced budget changes to taxation are not available. However over the period 1992–93 to 1996–97 tax as a share of GDP rose from 34½ per cent. to 36 per cent.

EU Budget

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to use the 1998–99 Contingency Reserve in order to accommodate a higher than expected United Kingdom net contribution to the European Community Budget in 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [14521]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* Should the UK's net contribution in 1998–99 turn out to be higher than in published public expenditure plans, the additional expenditure would fall to be met from the Reserve. There is, however, no reason to suppose that the estimates made by the previous Government will be insufficient.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date he will be able to publish a revised estimate of the United Kingdom's net contribution to the European Community Budget for 1998; if he will update the figures for United Kingdom expenditure on the European Communities for 1998–99 as set down in the Financial statement and Budget report 1997–98, page 123, Table 5.A.4; and if he will make a statement. [14520]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* An estimate for the UK's net contribution to the 1998 European Community Budget will, as usual, be included in the annual White Paper on the EC Budget. The Government hopes to publish the White Paper on the 1998 Budget in the Spring of next year. A revised Treasury forecast for the UK's net contribution in respect of the financial year 1998–99 will be included in the "Financial Statement and Budget Report", and also the "Departmental Report of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's smaller Departments", both of which are expected to be published in March next year.

Green Budget

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the arrangements for the presentation of the Green Budget to Parliament. [15086]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 November 1977]:* My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will make a statement to the House on 25 November (as announced to the hon. Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 30 October, *Official Report*, column *884)*, when he will also be presenting a Command Paper.

VAT (Energy Saving Materials)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if his Department has yet completed its review of the rate of value added tax on energy-efficient materials; and if he will make a statement. [14517]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* Customs have completed their review and are now preparing a report for publication.

G7 Central Banks

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the various differences in the arrangements for operational independence by central banks in the conduct of monetary policy among those G-7 countries which have introduced such arrangements, from those applicable under his proposals in the United Kingdom. [14511]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* The proposed arrangements by the Chancellor to give the Bank of England statutory operational responsibility over monetary policy are along similar lines to the arrangements in other G-7 countries. Most countries have moved to give central banks greater operational responsibility and to focus monetary policy on price stability. However the arrangements for the UK are a British solution for British needs.

The Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England has operational responsibility to achieve a monetary policy target set by the Chancellor. The Chancellor retains the right to override the operational autonomy of the Bank in extreme economic circumstances and if it is in the public interest.

Arrangements for other G-7 countries give varying degrees of independence to the central bank. The most independent is the Bundesbank, which has full independence from the Government and is required neither to consult nor report to Parliament. The Banque de France has recently been reformed to give it full independence over monetary policy decisions and bring its arrangements into line with the proposed arrangements for the ESCB.

In the US, the Federal Reserve has discretion over both the goals and instruments of monetary policy; but it is required to give a full account of its policies to Congress.

The Bank of Japan Law has been revised recently to establish the independence of the Bank of Japan (which comes into effect from April 1, 1998), but is designed to ensure that Government views are heard. The Government retains the right to attend and make proposals to the Policy Board.

The Bank of Canada also has considerable discretion over the goals and instruments of monetary policy. But the Canadian Government has ultimate responsibility for the direction of monetary policy and, in case of disagreements, retains the right to issue a directive to the Bank in respect of monetary policy.

The Banca D'Italia also has considerable autonomy. The Governor sets autonomously the official discount rate, and neither Parliament or the Government can interfere in this process. However the Bank's annual monetary policy objectives must be approved by the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Economic Planning.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the costs of converting to the Euro for *(a)* Government, *(b)* retailers, *(c)* manufacturers, *(d)* the financial sector, *(e)* the public and *(f)* the economy as a whole; and if he will make a statement. [13718]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The cost of converting to the euro would depend on the timing and detailed nature of the transition. The Chancellor has set up a Standing Committee to consider how the United Kingdom would approach the transition to the euro if and when the United Kingdom joins, and he is receiving advice from business sources through a Business Advisory Group looking at the practical implications of economic and monetary union.

The Government believes that, in principle, the United Kingdom should join a successful EMU provided the economic benefits of joining are clear and unambiguous. The Chancellor set out the five tests against which the economic case will be judged. The Treasury's assessment of the five economic tests is available in the Library of the House.

Tourism

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much money is set aside in the current European Union budget for tourism *(a)* under the Leader II programme and *(b)* under other European programmes; how much of this is targeted at projects in the United Kingdom; what assessment he has made of the cost-effectiveness of the programmes; and if he will make a statement. [12501]

Mr. Tom Clarke: I have been asked to reply. The information is not available in the form requested.

Many Community programmes have an impact on tourism, or tourism has a role to play in them although tourism is not the primary purpose of the programmes. No figures are therefore available which show the total spending which might have relevance to tourism. The Commission has recently produced a report highlighting some of these areas and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport submitted an Explanatory Memorandum to Parliament on 31 July on European Community Document COM(97) 332 FINAL (also numbered 9712/97): Community Measures Affecting Tourism in 1995–96.

The only direct programmes relating to tourism have been the European Year of Tourism 1991 and the Tourism Action Plan of 1993–95, both of which were criticised in European Court of Auditors Special Report No 3/96 (Document 11833/96, also numbered 17859) on tourist policy and the promotion of tourism, on which the European Legislation Committee of the House reported in its Report No 16 session 96/97, and on which there was subsequent correspondence by the Chairman of the Committee and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Farmers (Exchange Rate Fluctuations)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has to introduce a system of dispensation to reflect exchange rate fluctuations similar to that available to German farmers. [14965]

Mr. Rooker: EU rules make it possible for the UK to compensate farmers for the income effects of revaluations of the rates used to convert subsidies and other amounts fixed under the CAP into sterling. Paying this aid would have significant implications for UK public expenditure. We are keeping the situation under review but, on the evidence currently available, have concluded that the case for payment is at present not proven.

Calves

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many calves have been imported from the continent for slaughter in United Kingdom abattoirs since 1 July; from which countries they have been imported; and if he will make a statement. [14908]

Mr. Rooker: Information taken from the Animal Movement (ANIMO) electronic data system indicates that no bovine animals were imported into the United Kingdom from the continent for slaughter between July and September 1997 inclusive.

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to bring into force the new arrangements whereby the veterinary surgeons responsible for inspecting live animals prior to export will be appointed and paid by him; and if he will make a statement. [13913]

Mr. Morley: Preliminary discussions have been held with the British Veterinary Association and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons about the arrangements for the appointment and payment of local veterinary inspectors by this Department. Following consideration of points raised by the BVA and the RCVS, formal proposals will be drawn up including a date for implementing the new arrangements.

Sheep Annual Payment Scheme

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what is his Department's estimate for expenditure on the sheep annual payment scheme for 1997–98; [15461]

(2) what was his Department's forecast of expenditure on sheep annual payment for the financial year 1997–98. [15460]

Mr. Morley: I am replying in my right hon. Friend's absence as he is on official business in South Africa.

The Department's published estimate provision for 1997–98 included £175 million for the sheep annual premium scheme, which is entirely funded by reimbursements from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund. The estimate has not changed.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make representations to the Treasury, in respect of his Department's underspend on current payments of sheep annual payment, to use the surplus to maintain 1997 levels of hill livestock compensatory allowance payments; and if he will make a statement. [15459]

Mr. Morley: I am replying in my right hon. Friend's absence as he is on official business in South Africa.

The Sheep Annual Premium Scheme is fully funded by the European Union. To the extent that actual expenditure falls short of the published estimates, the shortfall is offset by a corresponding loss of receipts from the European Agriculture Guidance and Guarantee Fund. As such, no spare funds result which could be directed towards the payment of Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances.

Public Expenditure

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his Department's public expenditure ceiling for 1997–98. [15462]

Mr. Morley: I am replying in my right hon. Friend's absence as he is on official business in South Africa.

The published Estimate Provision for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for 1997–98, net of EAGGF reimbursement if £765 million.

Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if his Department's maintenance of 1997 levels of Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowance rates of payment for 1998 will breach his overall PES limit for 1997–98. [15463]

Mr. Morley: I am replying in my right hon. Friend's absence as he is on official business in South Africa.

The rates of payment for Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances in 1997 included a one off increase to help farmers cope with the immediate effects of the BSE crisis. PES provision for 1997–98 does not provide for this increase to be sustained in 1998.

Beef

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish for each month, for *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997 to date the levels of domestic beef consumption. [15458]

Mr. Morley: I am replying in my right hon. Friend's absence as he is on official business in South Africa.

Available monthly information on the consumption of beef in the home is given in the table.

This information is from the National Food Survey. The monthly estimates shown contain a greater level of sampling error than the quarterly results normally published for this survey. Therefore a degree of caution is needed when comparing individual month on month changes.

Household consumption in Great Britain[1]

Grams of product per person per week[2]

	Beef[3]			*Beef sausages*			*Corned beef*[4]			*Frozen burgers (all meats)*[5]		
	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
January	145	123	119	23	27	13	14	14	12	16	20	13
February	133	104	106	26	21	13	15	14	3	5	19	8
March	136	104	126	19	12	14	17	11	16	19	15	16
April	107	68	95	14	12	10	12	11	12	14	15	18
May	126	93	116	25	15	11	18	11	16	22	15	16
June	107	89	127	22	14	9	15	13	16	18	19	16
July	96	106	87	27	13	21	16	14	14	23	13	23
August	98	100	103	25	14	17	15	12	16	25	17	15
September	122	93	—	26	15	—	19	10	—	30	16	—
October	137	109	—	24	15	—	14	10	—	19	15	—
November	122	109	—	22	22	—	15	10	—	21	16	—
December	117	105	—	22	12	—	17	10	—	14	11	—

Source:
Sample estimates of household purchases from the National Food Survey.
[1] Information is not available about beef contained in a wide range of other products such as meat pies.
[2] In the case of the three meat products the weight shown is of the product not the weight of beef contained within it.
[3] May include a very small amount of veal.
[4] May contain a small amount of other corned meat.
[5] Consumption of frozen beefburgers is not separately available. Excludes cooked burgers taken home.

Fisheries (Minimum Landing Sizes)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list by species *(a)* the minimum landing size in force prior to the recent Fisheries Council meeting and *(b)* the proposed new minimum landing sizes. [15346]

Mr. Morley: I have arranged for the material requested to be placed in the Library of the House.

Fisheries (Discards)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what were the rules in respect of discarding prior to the Fisheries Council meeting on 30 October; what rules will apply to discards in future; and if he will make a statement on the changes involved. [15345]

Mr. Morley: The present EC technical conservation regulation requires sorting of fish to be carried out immediately after nets have been hauled. The Regulation requires protected species (defined in the Regulation) in excess of catch composition percentages laid down, to be discarded immediately into the sea. Other provisions require undersized fish, shellfish and crustaceans to be discarded immediately.

The new EC Regulation agreed at the Fisheries Council on 30 October to come into effect on 1 January 2000 alters these rules so that:

- for all vessels at all times the percentage of target species retained on board must be at least half that required by the Regulation;
- in addition, for those vessels required to complete logbooks, after the first 24 hours of a trip the catch composition percentages must be correct at time of the daily completion of the logbooks;
- in all cases, the catch composition percentages must be correct at time of return to port.

As in the present regulation, undersized specimens must be discarded immediately.

These changes are to reduce the quantity of fish discarded.

WALES

Telecommunications

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what current plans there are to introduce new telecommunications infrastructure, with particular reference to the provision of fibre optics, into the whole of Wales; and if he will make a statement. [14550]

Mr. Hain: Infrastructure investment is a matter for telecommunication companies. Nevertheless Welsh Office officials regularly meet telecommunication infrastructure providers to encourage the expansion and upgrading of the network throughout Wales. Support is also given to initiatives being driven forward by local authorities and development agencies which aim to improve the telecommunications infrastructure.

Education

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list by constituency the *(a)* number and *(b)* percentages of 16 to 18-year-olds in full-time education ranked by descending percentage. [14828]

Mr. Hain: In the academic year 1995–96, 59,026 16 to 18-year-olds—58 per cent of the age group—participated in full-time education. No comprehensive central record of students' home addresses is maintained so figures by constituency are not available.

Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects to make an announcement about *(a)* the proposed Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve and *(b)* the proposed compulsory purchase orders; and what assessment he has made of alternative approaches to the proposed Gwent Levels Wetland Reserve. [14959]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The report of the Inspector on the public inquiry into the appeals and applications by the Land Authority for Wales is currently under consideration by my right hon. Friend. The inquiry dealt with a number of complex issues and a decision will be issued as soon as possible. It would not be appropriate at this stage to comment on matters related to those appeals and applications.

Offset Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assistance the Welsh Office gave to the organisers of the Offset exhibition at the North Wales Centre, Aberconwy; and what was the cost to public funds. [15299]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh Office did not provide any assistance to the organisers of the Offset UK97 conference held at Llandudno last month. The Welsh Development Agency, however, did provide support to bring the event to Wales. The detail of that support is an operational matter for the Agency and I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend direct.

General Practitioners

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many sole practitioner GPs there are in *(a)* Wales as a whole and *(b)* each health authority area. [15286]

Mr. Win Griffiths: The information is given in the following table:

Single-handed general medical practitioners as at 1 April 1997

	Number
North Wales	31
Dyfed Powys	11
Morgannwg	19
Bro Taf	28
Gwent	36
Wales	125

Military Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what discussions he has had with the Welsh Office Exports Promotion Department about the Government's policy on the sale and supply of military, security and police equipment to oppressive regimes; and if he will place the minutes of the meeting in the Library; [15296]

(2) what *(a)* instructions and *(b)* policy guidelines he has issued to the Welsh Office Exports Promotion Department about the Government's policy on the sale and supply of military, security and police equipment to oppressive regimes; and if he will place a copy of such guidelines and instructions in the Library. [15297]

Mr. Hain: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave her on 27 June which sets out the Government's position on these matters—*Official Report*, column *648*.

NHS Funding

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much of the additional funding for the NHS in the coming year will be allocated to Wales. [15287]

Mr. Win Griffiths: In my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budget Statement on 2 July, *Official Report*, column 315, he announced an additional £1.2 billion for the NHS in 1998–99 of which an additional £60.2 million will be allocated to Wales.

Higher Education

Mr. Alan Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what proposals he has to increase his 1997–98 allocation of funds to higher education. [13774]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* I was pleased to announce on 5 November that in 1998–99 an additional £10 million will be available for higher

education in Wales. This new investment will match proportionately the package announced for England recently by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Social Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will list for each social services department his estimate of the additional funding which will be made available this winter; [14590]

(2) if he will list by health authority the dates on which the social services departments within each health authority were invited to make applications for additional funding to assist with managing pressures over this winter, indicating the deadlines they were given for completing their funding applications. [14595]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I have recently announced an additional £9.548 million for health authorities this year to alleviate to pressures on emergency admissions. Health authorities will submit their action plans to my officials at the end of November. It will be for health authorities to consider whether, as part of their plans, additional funding will be provided to social services departments.

In July, I also announced £2.5 million to promote primary and community health care in Wales. Within that, health authorities may apply for a share of £250,000 set aside for joint ventures with private nursing homes to provide care this winter for those who do not require the full range of hospital services or who are awaiting the completion of packages of care before discharge.

Roads

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list total Government spending on the *(a)* M4, *(b)* A55, *(c)* A470 and *(d)* A487 in current real value prices, for (i) each year since 1970 and (ii) in total. [14688]

Mr. Hain: The information on expenditure is not held centrally for each individual road in the Welsh trunk road network as much of the work on these roads is carried out by local authorities acting as trunk road agents for the Welsh Office.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list total Government spending planned for each of the next five financial years and the current financial year on the *(a)* M4, *(b)* A55, *(c)* A470 and *(d)* A487 expressed in current real value, indicating the cumulative total planned. [14687]

Mr. Hain: Spending plans for the current financial year are detailed in the 1997 Welsh Office Departmental Report, copies of which are available in the Library of the House. Plans for the next and subsequent financial years will be published following the outcome of the relevant Public Expenditure Survey deliberations.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on official hospitality for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997. [15270]

Mr. Ron Davies: The information requested is as follows:

	Welsh Office £	*Agency (CADW)* £
1991–92	36,463 (figures include CADW)	—
1992–93	38,000 (figures include CADW)	—
1993–94	26,818	2,248
1994–95	28,784	1,734
1995–96	22,090	417
1996–97	21,033	478
1997–98[1]	6,524	16

[1] 1 May to 30 September 1997.

Expenditure on hospitality by non-departmental public bodies sponsored by my Department is a matter for the management of these bodies; details are not held centrally. Figures for 1980–81, 1987, 1988 and 1990–91 are not available.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list each of the overseas trips made by himself and other members of his ministerial team since 2 May, specifying in each case *(a)* the participating Minister of Ministers, *(b)* the destination of the trip, *(c)* the purpose of the trip and *(d)* the cost of the trip; and if he will make a statement. [15272]

Mr. Ron Davies: Since being elected to Office, I have undertaken one overseas trip. Between 11 and 18 October I visited Japan and Korea to promote inward investment. The Welsh Development Agency, who funded the trip, estimate that the costs for myself and my Private Secretary amounted to some £21,676. There have been no other ministerial trips overseas.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on overseas travel for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997; and if he will provide a breakdown to show (1) air fares and (2) other expenditure relating to overseas travel. [15271]

Mr. Ron Davies: Records are not held separately for expenditure on overseas travel by my Department or its agency, and are not held centrally for NDPBs.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his estimate of the total expenditure on all forms of publicity and advertising by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies for (i) 1993–94, (ii) 1994–95, (iii) 1995–96, (iv) 1996–97, (v) the 1997–98 year to date, (vi) the 1997–98 full year estimate and (vii) the 1998–99 planned expenditure. [15273]

Mr. Ron Davies: The total expenditure on all forms of publicity and advertising by *(a)* my Department, *(b)* its agency CADW and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies for the years requested are set out in the following table.

Annual expenditure

(a) Welsh Office	*Total expenditure £000*
1993–94	1,358
1994–95	1,725
1995–96	1,929
1996–97	1,795
197–98 to date (end October)	891
1997–98 full year estimate	[1]2.4 million
1998–99 Publicity plans for the 1998–99 financial year have not been finalised.	

[1] Includes expenditure on Referendum publicity.

(b) CADW	*Total expenditure £000*
1993–94	301
1994–95	305
1995–96	305
1996–97	316
1997–98 to date (end October)	202
1997–98 full year estimate	321
1998–99	[1]321

[1] Estimate.

(c) NDPB's	*Total expenditure £000*
1993–94	[1]n/a
1994–95	17,197
1995–96	17,800
1996–97	18,255
1997–98 to date (end October)	7,311
1997–98 full year estimate	17,832
1998–99 Budgets for 1998–99 have not yet been set	

[1] Comparable figures for this year are not available.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Denominational Schools

Mr. Norman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what effect the Government's proposals in the Education White Paper will have on the composition of the governing bodies of denominational schools when they change from grant-maintained status to foundation or aided schools. [14967]

Mr. Byers: The consultation document, "Framework for the Organisation of Schools", set out in detail our proposals for the composition of foundation and aided school governing bodies under the new schools framework.

Our consultation was genuine. We listened carefully to the views expressed and have agreed to make some amendments to the proposed composition of aided school governing bodies to accommodate a majority of two foundation governors at primary schools and three at larger secondary schools. This will apply to denominational grant-maintained schools which choose to become aided. As set out in the Technical Consultation Paper, denominational grant-maintained schools which choose to become foundation will still have a significant number of foundation governors, but not a foundation majority. I am pleased to say that this overall approach has been welcomed by the churches.

Staffordshire Training and Enterprise Council

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of the Staffordshire TEC budget was spent on *(a)* management training for small firms and *(b)* business start-up training in each of the last five years. [15352]

Dr. Howells: It is not possible to respond to this question as "management training for small firms" is not identified as a separate TEC budget line by either DfEE or DTI.

The situation with regard to Business start-up training is given below (only the last four years detailed records are readily accessible).

Contract year	*TEC budget[1] (£million)*	*Business start-up budget[2] £*	*Business start-up budget as a percentage of TEC budget*
1994–95	26.3	800,555	3
1995–96	26.0	159,124	0.6
1996–97	28.3	400,000	1.4
1997–98	24.5	557,348	2.3

[1] TEC budget 1994–95 and 1995–96 comprises of DfEE funds only. TEC Budget 1996–97 and 1997–98 comprises of DfEE funds and DTI Business Support funds (including ERDF co-financing).
[2] Business start-up budget 1994–95 and 1995–96 comprises of DfEE funds only.
Business start-up budget 1996–97 comprises of £350,000 from the Single Regeneration Budget and £50,000 from Staffordshire TEC Reserves.
Business start-up budget 1997–98 comprises of £289,000 from the Single Regeneration Budget, £131,000 from Staffordshire TEC Reserves and £137,348 for Enterprise Rehearsal within the DfEE funding stream for Training for Work.

Student Loans

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to extend eligibility for Access Fund payments to part-time students in higher education from 1998–99; and what estimate he has made of the cost. [14434]

Dr. Howells: We have already indicated that part-time students will become eligible for consideration for payment from the higher education Access Funds from the beginning of the academic year 1998–99. Our guidance to the Funding Council will be amended to reflect this. We have also announced that the total amount available to the higher education Access Funds will be doubled.

Spending from the Access Funds is not demand led in the sense that if more students are eligible to apply, more money will need to be paid out. A fixed sum is allocated for the academic year and distributed amongst higher education institutions, who decide individual payments on

the basis of the evidence of financial difficulties presented by students applying. Doubling the amount available is intended to improve the position of both part-time and full-time students.

GCSE Results (New Towns)

Barbara Follett: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by gender the number and percentage of 15-year-olds living in the 21 English new towns who achieved at least five grade A GCSE passes in the 1996–97 school year.[14394]

Dr. Howells: The GCSE results of pupils are collected by Local Education Authority area in which the school is located not by where a pupil lives. Information is not available by new towns, however, the latest data available by LEA are shown in the following table.

Pupils aged 15 in maintained schools in England 1995–96 achieving five or more grades A in GCSE

	Boys		*Girls*		*Total*	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Camden	60	8.1	130	12.5	190	10.6
Greenwich	39	3.3	55	4.5	94	3.6
Hackney	10	1.7	31	3.9	41	3.0
Hammersmith and Fulham	26	4.8	47	9.2	73	6.9
Islington	10	1.2	28	5.2	38	2.8
Kensington and Chelsea	27	9.9	20	7.1	47	8.5
Lambeth	6	1.1	26	3.7	32	2.6
Lewisham	28	2.6	57	5.9	85	4.1
Southwark	10	1.1	23	2.6	33	1.9
Tower Hamlets	20	1.8	21	2.1	41	1.9
Wandsworth	41	4.4	46	6.3	87	5.3
Westminster	22	3.3	38	6.0	60	4.6
Barking and Dagenham	26	2.8	17	2.0	43	2.4
Barnet	170	10.2	242	15.9	412	12.9
Bexley	71	5.4	105	8.7	176	7.0
Brent	38	3.4	43	4.1	81	3.7
Bromley	132	9.0	203	13.8	335	11.4
Croydon	52	3.2	120	8.0	172	5.5
Ealing	47	3.8	74	5.9	121	4.9
Enfield	90	5.3	148	10.0	238	7.5
Haringey	34	4.0	49	5.8	83	4.9
Harrow	97	9.1	138	13.4	235	11.2
Havering	68	4.7	125	8.9	193	6.8
Hillingdon	67	5.1	101	8.2	168	6.6
Hounslow	54	4.2	123	9.7	177	6.9
Kingston upon Thames	86	14.2	153	20.6	239	17.8
Merton	26	3.1	69	9.5	95	6.0
Newham	22	1.6	66	4.8	88	3.2
Redbridge	91	6.9	145	11.4	236	9.1
Richmond upon Thames	42	5.6	104	13.7	146	9.7
Sutton	117	11.7	136	14.8	253	13.2
Waltham Forest	37	3.0	72	6.2	109	4.6
Birmingham	261	4.4	419	7.3	680	5.8
Coventry	64	3.7	106	6.2	170	4.9
Dudley	111	5.7	149	8.3	260	7.0
Sandwell	35	1.8	36	2.0	71	1.9
Solihull	85	5.8	132	9.2	217	7.5
Walsall	77	4.2	101	6.0	178	5.0
Wolverhampton	34	2.3	120	8.2	154	5.3
Knowsley	8	0.9	15	1.8	23	1.3
Liverpool	115	4.3	131	4.8	246	4.5
St. Helens	48	4.5	109	9.8	157	7.2
Sefton	116	6.6	156	8.9	272	7.8
Wirral	152	7.3	222	11.1	374	9.2
Bolton	98	5.7	121	7.5	219	6.6
Bury	53	5.0	140	13.9	193	9.3
Manchester	43	2.1	84	4.3	127	3.2
Oldham	53	3.2	103	6.4	156	4.8
Rochdale	45	3.5	67	5.1	112	4.3
Salford	19	1.7	58	4.7	77	3.3
Stockport	123	8.0	160	9.9	283	8.9
Tameside	55	4.0	82	6.0	137	5.0
Trafford	97	8.6	169	14.1	266	11.4
Wigan	115	5.5	199	10.4	314	7.9
Barnsley	22	1.6	51	4.2	73	2.9
Doncaster	69	3.7	116	6.3	185	5.0
Rotherham	89	5.1	105	5.8	194	5.5
Sheffield	176	6.4	220	8.6	396	7.5
Bradford	86	2.7	141	4.8	227	3.7
Calderdale	69	5.6	96	8.0	165	6.8

Pupils aged 15 in maintained schools in England 1995–96 achieving five or more grades A in GCSE

	Boys		Girls		Total	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Kirklees	85	3.6	185	8.1	270	5.8
Leeds	184	4.5	314	8.1	498	6.2
Wakefield	76	4.1	103	5.6	179	4.8
Gateshead	71	6.0	102	8.8	173	7.4
Newcastle upon Tyne	58	4.1	124	8.9	182	6.5
North Tyneside	51	4.3	106	9.5	157	6.8
South Tyneside	26	2.7	52	5.3	78	4.0
Sunderland	43	2.2	105	5.6	148	3.8
Isles of Scilly	3	27.3	3	20.0	6	23.1
Bath and North East Somerset	68	6.8	110	11.0	178	8.9
City of Bristol	57	3.4	99	6.1	156	4.7
North Somerset	93	8.5	108	10.6	201	9.5
South Gloucestershire	85	5.8	133	10.5	218	8.0
Hartlepool	19	3.1	31	5.2	50	4.1
Middlesbrough	27	2.8	37	3.9	64	3.3
Redcar and Cleveland	62	5.9	80	7.6	142	6.7
Stockton on Tees	69	5.5	103	8.8	172	7.1
City of Kingston upon Hull	22	1.4	50	3.4	72	2.4
East Riding of Yorkshire	94	5.2	164	9.1	258	7.1
North East Lincolnshire	45	4.2	44	3.8	89	4.0
North Lincolnshire	61	5.7	65	6.4	126	6.1
North Yorkshire	325	9.8	396	12.6	721	11.2
York	69	7.8	88	10.7	157	9.2
Bedfordshire	155	4.5	280	8.6	435	6.5
Berkshire	350	8.0	513	12.4	863	10.2
Buckinghamshire	469	11.8	506	13.1	975	12.4
Cambridgeshire	315	8.0	412	10.8	727	9.3
Cheshire	507	8.7	707	12.1	1,214	10.4
Cornwall	198	6.8	264	10.0	462	8.3
Cumbria	181	6.2	264	9.5	445	7.8
Derbyshire	297	5.3	433	7.8	730	6.6
Devon	332	6.0	551	9.9	883	7.9
Dorset	291	7.7	438	12.3	729	9.9
Durham	156	4.2	244	6.9	400	5.5
East Sussex	175	5.1	282	8.9	457	6.9
Essex	540	5.9	784	8.9	1,324	7.4
Gloucestershire	240	7.7	366	12.1	606	9.9
Hampshire	531	6.1	813	9.8	1,344	7.9
Hereford and Worcester	216	5.4	364	9.1	580	7.3
Hertfordshire	448	7.6	699	11.8	1,147	9.7
Isle of Wight	40	5.6	48	6.8	88	6.2
Kent	647	7.0	943	10.3	1,590	8.6
Lancashire	542	6.5	758	9.3	1,300	7.9
Leicestershire	254	4.5	392	7.3	646	5.9
Lincolnshire	239	6.7	374	10.6	613	8.6
Norfolk	203	4.7	347	8.4	550	6.5
Northamptonshire	188	5.0	259	7.0	447	6.0
Northumberland	129	6.9	232	11.7	361	9.4
Nottinghamshire	234	3.8	375	6.4	609	5.1
Oxfordshire	200	6.4	303	10.2	503	8.2
Shropshire	179	6.9	252	10.7	431	8.7
Somerset	207	8.1	284	11.3	491	9.7
Staffordshire	348	5.3	528	8.6	876	6.9
Suffolk	272	7.3	377	10.6	649	8.9
Surrey	315	6.7	501	11.2	816	8.9
Warwickshire	166	5.8	231	8.3	397	7.1
West Sussex	293	7.4	488	12.4	781	9.9
Wiltshire	258	8.1	388	12.5	646	10.3
Total England	15,792	5.7	23,965	9.0	39,757	7.3

Higher Education

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what studies his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into the unit costs of comparable education programmes provided by (i) training and enterprise councils and (ii) colleges. [13113]

Dr. Howells: The Department published "The Public Funding Cost of Education and Training for 16–19 year olds in England in 1995–96" in March this year. This covers the cost of successfully achieving 3 A levels and advanced GNVQs in colleges and NVQ3s in work-based training. The analysis is carried out by the Department in consultation with external partners.

Welfare to Work (West Midlands)

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what arrangements have been made to involve the voluntary sector in the Welfare to Work programme in the west midlands. [14265]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Ms Jennifer Jones, dated 11 November 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question about the arrangements that have been made to involve the voluntary sector in the Welfare to Work programme in the West Midlands. This is something that falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

A great deal of activity has been undertaken, both at a regional level and locally, to ensure that voluntary sector organisations in the West Midlands are fully involved with the development of New Deal and the plans to implement it. In particular, over 100 representatives from 73 voluntary organisations attended a series of regional consultation events over the summer. They represented a range of voluntary sectors including women's groups; those with concern for issues of crime, race, homelessness, age; more general volunteer bureaux; and those representing local churches.

In more recent months the Employment Service Regional Director, Scott McIntyre, has personally met a number of voluntary organisations including the Princes Trust, Birmingham Voluntary Sector Council, Groundwork Trust, Business in the Community, Rathbone Community Industry, West Midlands Low Pay Unit, Foyer for Birmingham, the Irish Community Forum, British Trust for conservation Volunteers and is due to meet shortly the Young Offender Consortium.

Employment Service District Managers in the region have also been working with voluntary sector networks, through District events and meetings. For instance, in the Black Country Pathfinder area 89 organisations attended two District Voluntary Sector conferences from the full range of voluntary organisations in the area.

In the same Pathfinder area Dudley Council for Voluntary Services, Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations, Wolverhampton Voluntary Sector Council and Walsall Voluntary Sector Council are all involved in a Joint Venture Partnership to take forward the Voluntary sector option in the Pathfinder.

A similar level of activity can be found throughout the rest of the region and is set to continue as New Deal is developed further over the next few months. Assessment panels which are taking place over the next few weeks will consider in detail the plans for each New Deal partnership in the region. Three members of these panels, Allison Millward (Groundwork Trust and a member of the National Task Force), Ian Morrison (Birmingham Voluntary Services Council) and Sue Nicholls (Hereford and Worcester Community Council) will be from the voluntary sector.

I hope this is helpful.

Social Affairs Council

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EU Social Affairs Council on 6 November. [15841]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I represented the UK at the Social Affairs Council on 6 November.

This supplementary meeting was convened solely for the purpose of making preparations for the Extraordinary European Council on Employment taking place in Luxembourg on 20–21 November.

The meeting discussed the Commission's draft communication concerning the preparation of draft Guidelines on Employment which were called for by the Amsterdam European Council in June. I expressed the UK's broad satisfaction with the overall structure and key themes of the Guidelines and welcomed growing recognition that EU wide numerical targets on employment and unemployment were inappropriate. There was agreement among Member States and the Presidency on the need for the Guidelines primarily to express consensus on the areas in which Member States should take action to tackle unemployment and promote employability and that Member States should draw up Action Plans as the basis for national implementation of the Guidelines. The UK has a number of detailed comments which it will be discussing with the Presidency and other Member States. There will be further discussion at a joint meeting of the Social Affairs Council and the Economic and Finance Council of Ministers on 17–18 November.

School (Exclusions)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his current estimate of the number of children excluded from *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools. [15059]

Ms Estelle Morris: In the 1995–96 school year, 1,608 pupils were permanently excluded from primary schools and 10,344 were permanently excluded from secondary schools.

Figures for the 1996–97 school year will be collected as part of the annual Schools Census in January 1998.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the number of trainees that are likely to qualify for modern apprenticeship this year; and what is his estimate of the trend for the next three years. [13900]

Dr. Howells: The number of people joining Modern Apprenticeships in 1997–98 is planned to be about 62,500.

All Government-funded programmes are currently being reviewed as part of the Departmental Spending Review. Plans for 1998–99 and later years will be announced in due course.

Careers Advice (Wolverhampton)

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the monitoring arrangements and criteria to be used by the Government Office of the west midlands when evaluating the performance of the private Careers Advice Service (PROSPECTS) operating in Wolverhampton. [14263]

Dr. Howells: All Careers Service companies must submit a plan to their local Government Office which contracts with careers service companies on a basis which is designed to ensure that necessary outcomes are achieved and the requirements of the DfEE are met. These requirements are set out in the document "The Requirements and Guidance for Careers Service Providers". This requires Careers Services to evaluate systematically their delivery of all contracted outcomes, operate an effective system for collecting customer feedback, and undertake a thorough annual review of their activities.

The Government Office monitors Careers Service companies' performance against the key indicators set down in this document against the companies' business plans and against the terms of the contract. Regular monitoring of the financial position of Careers Service companies is also routinely undertaken.

Grant-maintained Schools (Brent)

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the balances held by each grant-maintained school in the London Borough of Brent. [15464]

Mr. Byers: The monitoring of financial information provided by individual grant-maintained schools, including information on balances, is a matter for the Funding Agency for Schools. I have therefore written to Sir Anthony Tippet, Chairman of the Funding Agency, to ask him to provide the figures requested.

Child Care

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to implement a child care strategy; and what is the timetable for that strategy. [14570]

Mr. Alan Howarth: We have already taken action to improve child care by extending the child care disregard and offering young people the opportunity to obtain training and work experience in child care as part of the New Deal programme. We are currently developing a National Child care Strategy which will help parents, especially women, to balance family and working life and I will make an announcement in the first part of next year.

Hackney Borough Council

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he plans to approve the proposals contained in the report of the Improvement Team which he sent into Hackney Council; [15378]

(2) if he plans to reject any of the proposals contained in the report of the Improvement Team which he sent into Hackney Council; [15379]

(3) what assessment he has made of the criticisms made by the chief executive of Hackney Council of the proposals contained in the report of the Improvement Team which he sent into Hackney; and what plans he has for further work by the Improvement Team. [15380]

Mr. Byers: The Improvement Team appointed to advise Hackney Local Education Authority have delivered a report on the "Management and Leadership of the Hackney LEA" to the Chief Executive of the Borough. I am pleased that Hackney Council's Education and Leisure Services Committee have agreed to the appointment of a Director of Education on the salary recommended by the Improvement Team to provide leadership of the education service. The Improvement Team is continuing with its work and will submit an interim report to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in January 1998.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on overseas travel for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997; and if he will provide a breakdown to show (1) air fares and (2) other expenditure relating to overseas travel. [15259]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is available only at disproportionate cost.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on official hospitality for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997. [15258]

Dr. Howells: The information requested is available only at disproportionate cost.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is his estimate of the total expenditure on all forms of publicity and advertising by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies for (i) 1993–94, (ii) 1994–95, (iii) 1995–96, (iv) 1996–97, (v) the 1997–98, year to date, (vi) the 1997–98, full year estimate and (vii) the 1998–99 planned expenditure. [15261]

Dr. Howells: Before the merger in July 1995, the Department operated separately funded programmes of publicity. This continued until the end of the financial year 1995–96.

Information on the publicity and advertising spend of agencies and non-departmental public bodies is not held centrally by the Department

The costs of the total expenditure on publicity and on advertising for the former Departments are as follows:

Department for Education

1993–94: £10.1 million

1994–95: £9.4 million

1995–96: £5.4 million

Department of Employment

1993–94: £11.1 million

1994–95: £11.1 million

1995–96: £11.0 million

The costs of the total expenditure on publicity and advertising for the present Department are as follows:

Department for Education and Employment

1996–97: £17.4 million (provisional)

1997–98: £4.0 million (to date)

1997–98: £12.6 million (current budget, but £13.2 million subject to the passage of the Winter Supplementary Estimate).

The projected expenditure on publicity and advertising in 1998–99 for the Department is £13.1 million.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have to review the all work test for incapacity. [15354]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) on 27 October, *Official Report, column 731.*

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals against incapacity benefit disallowance were *(a)* received and *(b)* heard in the year ending March 1997; and what was the success rate for applicants. [15353]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

One of the Government's first priorities for Social Security is to modernise both the appeals system and the decision making process. We intend to introduce measures to streamline and simplify the system to make it easier to understand and more cost effective.

Period	*Number of incapacity benefit appeals against disallowance received*	*Number of appeals heard*	*Percentage of appeals heard and decided in the claimant's favour*
April 1996 to March 1997	100,703	59,567	44 per cent.

Source:
Benefits Agency and Independent Tribunal Service.

Advertising (Disability Discrimination Act 1995)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will place in the Library the correspondence sent by her Department to the Advertising Standards Authority disputing their draft recommendation on the compliant made by Ms Liz Lynne, about the national press advertisement for the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [14809]

Mr. Denham: The information, with a copy of the final adjudication, has been placed in the Library.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will list each of the overseas trips made by herself and other members of her ministerial team since 2 May, specifying in each case *(a)* the participating Minister or Ministers, *(b)* the destination of the trip, *(c)* the purpose of the trip and *(d)* the cost of the trip; and if she will make a statement. [15224]

Mr. Field: The information is in the table.

The Government intend to work constructively with their EU partners—member states, the Parliament and the Commission. These visits help prepare for a successful UK Presidency of the EU in 1998.

Date	*Minister*	*Destination*	*Purpose*	*Cost*
23 September	Keith Bradley	Brussels	To exchange views on the likely agenda in the social security policy area for the UK Presidency of the EU.	£1,499
8 October	Keith Bradley	Bonn		£1,418
12–14 October	Joan Ruddock	Venice	To attend a conference on "women in decision-making".	£1,693

1. The figures have been rounded to nearest pound.
2. The figures include all related costs incurred by the Minister's party, which on each occasion included the Minister's Private Secretary and one other official.

Mortgage Payments

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will review the practice whereby Benefits Agency adjudication officers cannot approve new mortgages for disabled persons until mortgage funds are advanced in circumstances where building societies are refusing to advance mortgages without confirmation of income support funds. [14621]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Modernising the social security system is a key priority of the Government. The administration of Income Support is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Crispin Blunt, dated 10 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if she will review the practice whereby Benefits Agency (BA) adjudication officers (AOs) cannot approve new mortgages for disabled persons until mortgage funds are advanced in circumstances where building societies are refusing to advance mortgages without confirmation of Income Support (IS) funds.

Decisions on individual entitlement to Social Security benefits are made by independent adjudication authorities. In order to make a decision an AO needs to consider the actual facts of the case. It is not possible to give a decision based on hypothetical circumstances. BA staff can however give advice on the rules that will be applied if a mortgage is taken out.

The current arrangements generally work well by giving customers a good indication of the help they may received if their circumstances change, while protecting the right of the AO to make a decision on the facts as they change. There are no plans therefore to review this practice.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

CABINET OFFICE

Millennium Dome

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) if he will provide details of the estimated total fees payable to *(a)* the Richard Rogers Partnership and *(b)* M and C Saatchi in relation to the millennium dome project; [12999]

(2) what is the estimated quantum of financial payment due to Kock Hightec by or on behalf of New Millennium Experience Company in relation to the millennium dome exhibition; [12995]

(3) if he will list the terms and conditions of contract between the New Millennium Experience Company and Koch Hightec regarding *(a)* termination and *(b)* breach of contract. [12996]

Mr. Mandelson: The information sought is commercial in confidence and falls within that category of exemptions provided for in the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information (which applies equally to the Government's non-departmental public bodies and agencies). I consider that disclosure could harm the competitive position of the companies concerned and could be disadvantageous to the New Millennium Experience Company in any future competitions for contracts where the equipment, goods or services sought might be similar, in any way, to those covered by the contracts referred to.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister without Portfolio on whose behalf he holds the single share in New Millennium Experience Company. [12994]

Mr. Mandelson: I hold the sole share of the New Millennium Experience Company Ltd. on behalf of the Government.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) when the New Millennium Experience Company will publish its next set of accounts; [13001]

(2) when the New Millennium Experience Company will place interim company accounts in the Library. [13002]

Mr. Mandelson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), then named Millennium Central Limited, became operative on 12 February 1997 when its first Board meeting was held. On the same date the shares of the company were transferred to the then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the company became subject to the normal controls applied by the Government to non-departmental public bodies (NDPB). The NMEC is required to produce its first Accounts and Annual Report for the period 12 February 1997 to 31 March 1998 and to submit them to the Shareholder by 30 September 1998. In line with policy applying to all NDPBs, the NMEC's Accounts and Annual Report will be published and copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister without Portfolio (1) if he will set out the tendering procedures which applied to the appointment of Birdair as contractors for the millennium dome project; [12997]

(2) if he will set out the tendering procedures which applied to the appointment of M and C Saatchi as contractors for the millennium dome project. [13000]

Mr. Mandelson: The procedures applied to the Birdair and to the M & C Saatchi contracts were those which the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is required to adopt for the procurement of all contracts for equipment, goods or services and which apply to all non-departmental public bodies. The NMEC must seek to obtain the best value for money, and must award contracts on a competitive basis unless it can show in a particular case that it can achieve better value for money by not doing so, or there are other compelling reasons for not doing so. The NMEC must also comply with European Community Directives governing tendering and contractual procedures and with any additional guidance that the Shareholder, or the Millennium Commission under the terms of its grant, may issue.

HEALTH

NHS Trusts

12. **Ms McCafferty:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria govern the qualifications and experience required for membership fo NHS trusts. [13820]

Mr. Milburn: The Government's new criteria are designed to make boards more representative of the communities they serve and to encourage more National Health Service users and carers to become board members. Candidates should live in the area served by the trust, and demonstrate a commitment to the NHS and to the local community.

19. **Mr. Drew:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health in respect of which projects the extra money made available for the NHS in the 1997 Budget has been allocated. [13828]

Mr. Milburn: The additional resources will be used to help hospitals cope with emergencies, reduce delays in discharge, support primary, community and social care services to keep people out of hospital where possible and begin to restrain the growth in waiting lists. The resources represent an investment for the long term in making the whole health and social services system work better in the future.

26. **Mr. Skinner:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the regional distribution of the extra funding which he is providing for the NHS over the winter period. [13835]

Mr. Milburn: Distribution to the eight regional offices has been made on a basis pro-rata to the allocations that their health authorities received for 1997–98. This has given fair regional shares within which the resources can be targeted quickly at areas with greatest need.

29. **Mr. Mitchell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has for removing the market forces factor from NHS financial allocations. [13838]

Mr. Milburn: We acknowledge that there are concerns in the National Health Service over the way the current market forces factor (MFF) operates.

We have asked the new Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation to undertaken a full review of the staff MFF.

For 1998–99 the staff MFF component of the weighted capitation formula has been modified.

GP Commissioning Guidance

21. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on GP commissioning guidance for 1998–99. [13830]

Mr. Milburn: In early September, we published guidance on the new approach to commissioning for 1998–99. This marked the transition from divisive, bureaucratic contracting out to a new co-operative approach. This will pave the way for a White Paper which will replace the internal market with a framework for quality and fairness.

NHS (East Surrey)

22. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on NHS provision in East Surrey. [13831]

Mr. Milburn: The provision of NHS services in East Surrey is a matter for East Surrey Health Authority to determine. They do this by working with local general practitioners, NHS trusts, other agencies and local people to ensure that national policies are implemented in a way which is sensitive to local needs.

Barnsley Hospital

23. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the proposed private finance initiative refurbishment of catering facilities at Barnsley District General Hospital. [13832]

Mr. Milburn: The Outline Business Case to refurbish catering facilities at Barnsley District General Hospital was approved on 13 October. The Trust is now seeking to attract private sector capital for this scheme under the Private Finance Initiative and will advertise in the *Official Journal* of the European Communities within the next month.

Dental Services

24. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what response he has received to his investing in dentistry initiative; and when he will allocate the funding earmarked for the programme. [13833]

Mr. Milburn: Since the extra £9 million under the Investing in Dentistry initiative was announced in September, we have received eleven requests for funding from health authorities. Funds are being allocated as decisions are made on each proposal submitted.

34. **Mr. Gill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received from the Shropshire health authority regarding NHS dentistry in South Shropshire. [13843]

Mr. Milburn: None.

NHS Bureaucracy

25. **Mr. Lepper:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to transfer money from NHS bureaucracy into patient care. [13834]

28. **Mr. Caplin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are his priorities for reducing bureaucracy in the NHS. [13837]

Mr. Milburn: On 22 May, we announced a programme of measures to reduce management costs by £100 million this year. We will shortly announce further target reductions for 1998–99.

As part of our plans to replace the internal market, we are looking at the scope for further management costs saving.

Local Health Strategies

27. **Dr. Starkey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to promote local health strategies in respect of public health. [13836]

Ms Jowell: Our forthcoming Green Paper, *Our Healthier Nation,* will emphasise the need for action at all levels—individual, local, and Government—to bring about improvements in health. Local level is where national policies are translated into practice. Joint working will be crucial to help us achieve the goals for improving health.

NHS Surgeons

30. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what new proposals he has to identify incompetence among NHS surgeons. [13839]

Mr. Milburn: The law bringing into force the General Medical Council's professional performance procedures, which affect all doctors, was implemented on 1 July 1997 and we will shortly be issuing guidance to the National Health Service on its role in these procedures.

In addition, the Chief Medical Officer has written to all Chief Executives and Medical Directors of NHS trusts asking them to ensure that they have effective procedures in place for doctors to report their concerns about the conduct, performance or health of medical colleagues. This builds on the General Medical Council's guidance in Duties of a Doctor which requires all doctors to:

"act quickly to prevent patients from risk if you have good reason to believe you or a colleague may not be fit for practise".

The effectiveness of these new procedures will be kept under review.

Tobacco Advertising

31. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to publish the White Paper on the intended banning of tobacco advertising. [13840]

Ms Jowell: The White Paper on tobacco control, which will include plans to ban tobacco advertising, will be published next year.

Waiting Lists

32. **Mr. Chidgey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what actions he plans to take to reduce waiting lists in Winchester and Eastleigh in the next 12 months. [13841]

Mr. Milburn: We expect health authorities and trusts to work together to reverse the trend in runaway growth in waiting lists and times that we inherited from the previous Government. This will take time but the extra £269 million we have re-assigned for the National Health Service in England for 1997-98, the extra £1 billion for next year announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July and the further cuts in NHS bureaucracy to be announced shortly will help.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the pattern of waiting lists throughout the United Kingdom, indicating the top three regions and specialties where the lists are greatest.

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to meet his targets to reduce NHS waiting lists. [13812]

Mr. Milburn: In England we inherited runaway growth in waiting lists from our predecessors. The £269 million we have re-directed to the National Health Service in England for 1997-98 and the extra £1 billion for next year announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in July will help health authorities and trusts to begin to restrain that growth. The latest available information about waiting lists in individual regions and specialties is contained in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England (Resident Based) Quarter ended 30 June 1997", copies of which are available in the Library. Questions relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, respectively.

Trust Mergers

33. **Mr. Rooney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he has given to health authorities on mergers of trusts. [13842]

Mr. Milburn: Mergers between National Health Service trusts are a matter for local consideration. Each proposal will be considered on its individual merits, taking into account the views of local people and staff.

I announced on 22 September that, if they are to proceed, trust mergers must show demonstrable improvements in patients services and will be expected to deliver a minimum of £½ million savings in bureaucracy within the first two years.

Smoking

35. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost to the NHS of smoking. [13844]

Ms Jowell: Based on 1992 figures, the Health Education Authority's report "The Smoking Epidemic—A Prescription for Change", estimated that the annual cost to the National Health Service of treating smoking-related diseases is £610 million. However, we understand that the Health Education Authority intend to publish more up-to-date figures shortly.

Bedblocking

36. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his proposals to tackle problems associated with bedblocking. [13845]

Mr. Boateng: There is nothing new about problems around hospital discharge and "bedblocking" and it is crucial that hospitals and social services departments work together to ensure that integrated and sensitive hospital discharge arrangements are in place for people with longer-term care needs. We recognise that much hard work has already gone into improving joint working in this area, but believe that there are still improvements that can be made in most places. As one part of the concerted effort my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has asked the National Health Service, social services and housing departments to tackle the pressures on health and local authority services which we expect as winter approaches, we expect hospital discharge arrangements to deliver an effective and timely outcome for patients, particularly for those who need community care support.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has written to Chairmen of health authorities, NHS trusts and leaders of councils outlining our plans for the extra £269 million funding for the NHS in England which was announced on 14 October. The new money is a key step in the Government's strategy to provide better care for older people for improving collaborative working between health and social care services and by tackling winter pressures in the NHS. One of our three priorities for the new money is the provision of more rehabilitation and recuperation services, home care and extra places in care homes to reduce delays in discharging patients from hospital.

In addition to tackling difficult and sort-term problems we are determined in the medium and longer-term to ensure that such problems do not constantly occur and to help all concerned to improve their work across the boundary between health and social care. We will also be issuing revised guidance on hospital discharge procedures.

NHS Staff Safety

37. **Mr. Darvill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to improve levels of safety for NHS staff. [13846]

Mr. Milburn: The Government place a very high priority on the safety of National Health Service staff. The NHS Chief Executive has written to health authority and NHS trust chief executives asking them to place issues of health and safety at the top of their agendas; the NHS Executive has also sponsored a series of Health and Safety roadshows for NHS senior management. We will be encouraging and promoting the formation of networks for the exchange of good practice in this area.

The Government have issued guidance to the NHS on ways to cut down on attacks on staff in accident and emergency departments. Also, the Health and Safety Commission will publish "Violence to Staff in Health Services: Guidance on Assessment and Management" before the end of the year, covering all parts of the NHS. The forthcoming NHS Charter will stress patients' responsibilities as well as rights, including the responsibility not to assault NHS staff. Those who assault staff should be appropriately punished.

Racism

38. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to tackle racism in the NHS. [13847]

Mr. Milburn: We announced a programme of concrete measures to tackle inequality, discrimination and racism in the National Health Service in recent speeches made to Unison on 7 October and to NHS leaders at the launch of the Commission for Racial Equality's "Leadership Challenge" in the NHS on 21 October. We have also put extra funding of £200,000 into specific activities to combat racism.

Welfare-to-work Scheme

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidelines he has set out regarding the participation of health authorities and trusts in the Government's welfare-to-work scheme. [13825]

Mr. Milburn: We are currently consulting with the Department of Education and Employment to consider the most effective way in which the National Health Service can play a useful role in providing employment opportunities for the unemployed. As the largest employer in Europe, we expect the NHS to play a significant role in the Welfare-to-Work initiative.

Cold-related Illnesses

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what have been the excess winter treatment rates for cold-related illnesses in hospitals in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* Cornwall, *(c)* Tyneside and *(d)* Suffolk for (i) in-patients and (ii) out-patients for each of the last 10 years; [14260]

(2) how many people in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* Cornwall, *(c)* Tyneside and *(d)* Suffolk received treatment by NHS doctors for cold-related illnesses in (i) December 1996 and (ii) January 1997; and what was the average figure for these months in each of the last 10 years; [14261]

(3) how many people in *(a)* Lancashire, *(b)* Cornwall, *(c)* Tyneside and *(d)* Suffolk received hospital treatment as (i) in-patients and (ii) out-patients, for cold-related illnesses in (1) December 1996 and (2) January 1997; and what was the average figure for these months in each of the last 10 years. [14262]

Mr. Boateng: For the purpose of these questions "cold-related illnesses" have been defined as pneumonia, influenza, bronchitis and hypothermia.

The information available is shown in the attached tables. Information is available only for hospital in-patients and is collected by health authority. Health authority boundaries may not coincide exactly with county boundaries. The latest information available is for the year 1994–95. Information prior to 1989–90 is not held in comparable form.

Information is not collected specifically on "excess winter treatment rates" but figures are provided for July and August each year for comparison with December and January.

"Cold related illnesses" admitted to hospital by primary diagnosis and selected health authority of residence; Estimated number of Finished Consultant Episodes (FCEs), ordinary admissions and day cases combined, NHS hospitals.

Source:
Department of Health, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES).
ICD9 Codes: Pneumonia 480–486, Influenza 487, Bronchitis 490–491, Hypothermia 991.6.

Data in these tables are grossed for both coverage and unknown/invalid clinical data.

Lancashire

Month	*Pneumonia*	*Influenza*	*Bronchitis*	*Hypothermia*	*Total*
July 1989	128	1	42	0	171
August 1989	122	2	39	0	163
December 1989	343	49	81	4	477
January 1990	200	12	71	4	287
July 1990	151	2	42	0	195
August 1990	105	1	35	0	141
December 1990	227	2	62	5	296
January 1991	214	3	48	9	274
July 1991	132	0	26	0	158
August 1991	120	1	27	0	148
December 1991	213	7	50	1	271
January 1992	223	9	45	4	281
July 1992	93	0	44	0	137
August 1992	105	0	15	0	120
December 1992	185	2	26	2	215
January 1993	187	2	41	5	235
July 1993	128	0	22	0	150
August 1993	117	0	12	2	131
December 1993	248	28	53	4	333
January 1994	266	5	53	7	331
July 1994	125	1	19	0	145
August 1994	129	0	30	1	160
December 1994	285	3	53	6	347
January 1995	265	2	47	5	319

July 1990 to January 1994 Blackpool, Wyre and Fylde DHA, Preston DHA, Blackburn, Hyndburn, Ribble DHA, Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale DHA, West Lancashire DHA, Chorley and South Ribble DHA.
July 1994 to January 1995 East Lancashire DHA, North-West Lancashire DHA, South Lancashire DHA.

Cornwall

Month	*Pneumonia*	*Influenza*	*Bronchitis*	*Hypothermia*	*Total*
July 1989	44	0	5	0	48
August 1989	19	2	5	0	25
December 1989	155	46	25	5	230
January 1990	71	6	8	0	86
July 1990	37	0	7	0	44
August 1990	27	0	7	0	34
December 1990	69	0	26	6	101
January 1991	82	1	20	2	105
July 1991	56	1	12	0	69
August 1991	49	0	2	2	53

Cornwall

Month	Pneumonia	Influenza	Bronchitis	Hypothermia	Total
December 1991	74	3	10	3	90
January 1992	84	7	9	2	102
July 1992	42	1	2	1	46
August 1992	36	1	7	1	45
December 1992	61	0	7	8	76
January 1993	58	2	8	1	69
July 1993	51	0	4	0	55
August 1993	43	2	4	1	50
December 1993	90	8	5	1	104
January 1994	78	4	3	1	86
July 1994	38	0	9	0	47
August 1994	42	0	6	0	48
December 1994	71	2	6	0	79
January 1995	87	0	5	5	97

Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority.

Suffolk

Month	Pneumonia	Influenza	Bronchitis	Hypothermia	Total
July 1989	68	0	6	0	75
August 1989	43	0	4	0	47
December 1989	159	28	8	8	202
January 1990	125	6	10	1	143
July 1990	67	0	3	0	70
August 1990	39	0	3	0	42
December 1990	145	4	22	3	174
January 1991	162	5	20	8	195
July 1991	52	0	22	0	74
August 1991	39	1	19	1	60
December 1991	107	2	31	6	146
January 1992	103	1	24	4	132
July 1992	48	0	10	0	58
August 1992	41	0	11	1	53
December 1992	77	1	25	8	111
January 1993	85	0	34	2	121
July 1993	62	0	7	0	69
August 1993	49	0	34	0	83
December 1993	91	6	17	2	116
January 1994	108	0	18	4	130
July 1994	44	0	14	0	58
August 1994	70	0	4	1	75
December 1994	134	2	17	4	157
January 1995	100	1	7	4	112

July 1989 to January 1993 West Suffolk DHA and East Suffolk DHA. July 1993 to January 1995 Suffolk DHA.

Tyneside

Month	Pneumonia	Influenza	Bronchitis	Hypothermia	Total
July 1989	91	7	14	1	113
August 1989	70	0	7	0	77
December 1989	196	21	18	3	239
January 1990	123	4	10	2	139
July 1990	86	4	7	0	97
August 1990	90	0	8	2	100
December 1990	128	1	8	3	140
January 1991	156	4	12	5	177
July 1991	112	2	9	9	123
August 1991	89	0	4	1	94
December 1991	221	12	11	4	248
January 1992	215	24	14	4	257
July 1992	107	0	3	0	110
August 1992	64	1	5	1	71
December 1992	159	0	6	2	167
January 1993	160	1	13	1	175

Tyneside

Month	Pneumonia	Influenza	Bronchitis	Hypothermia	Total
July 1993	120	3	1	0	124
August 1993	96	1	5	0	102
December 1993	161	25	15	4	205
January 1994	189	10	10	3	212
July 1994	104	1	8	0	113
August 1994	129	0	3	1	133
December 1994	175	1	9	7	192
January 1995	199	1	3	8	211

July 1989 to January 1994 Gateshead DHA, Newcastle DHA. North Tyneside DHA, South Tyneside DHA.
July 1994 to January 1995 Newcastle and North Tyneside DHA. South of Tyne DHA.

Blood Donation

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the National Blood Authority has to introduce a system of informed consent for blood donors, with particular reference to use of blood in *(a)* the private sector and *(b)* through overseas sales. [15586]

Mr. Boateng: Information for blood donors explains that donations are primarily used for National Health Service patients but that reasonable requests for blood for patients in the private sector are met and that blood products are sold overseas when demand in this country has been satisfied.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the National Blood Authority is required to hold an open annual general meeting. [15578]

Mr. Boateng: This is not currently required. We are considering the preparation of Regulations to extend the list of bodies to which the Public Bodies (Admissions to Meetings) Act 1960 applies.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the recommendations made by Professor John Cash on the future of the National Blood Service will be the subject of further consultation; and if he will make a statement. [15575]

Mr. Boateng: Professor Cash is carrying out a clinical review of the blood services for Merseyside and the surrounding area. We will consider next steps when we receive the report.

GP Fundholding

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were referred by fundholding GPs to the private sector for secondary health care in the last year for which figures are available. [14831]

Mr. Milburn: In 1996–97, general practitioner fundholders spent £71.5 million (2.7 per cent. of their total expenditure) outside the National Health Service.

A circular covering the priorities and planning guidance for 1998–99 requires health authorities, general practitioner fundholders and trusts to explore the scope to make maximum cost effective use of local NHS capacity before contemplating recourse to private sector hospital providers and, where care is nonetheless commissioned from private hospitals, to report the reasons to the regional office.

Health Service Managers

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS manages have had their jobs redesignated onto nursing or medical pay scales since 1 May. [14833]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is not collected centrally.

NHS Spending

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his current estimate of the annual real increase in NHS spending for each year from 1978–79 to 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [13234]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The answer is set out in the table.

Real growth in NHS total expenditure (England)

Year[1]	Gross expenditure Real growth[2] £ million (1996–97 prices)	Gross expenditure Real growth[2] Percentage growth	Net expenditure Real growth[2] £ million (1996–97 prices)	Net expenditure Real growth[2] Percentage growth
1978–79	615	3.2	299	1.6
1979–80	368	1.8	332	1.7
1980–81	2,065	10.1	1,979	10.1
1981–82	505	2.2	437	2.0
1982–83	412	1.8	364	1.7
1983–84	341	1.5	230	1.0
1984–85	567	2.4	492	2.2
1985–86	59	0.2	56	0.2
1986–87	1,068	4.4	903	3.9
1987–88	1,138	4.5	1,036	4.3
1988–89	1,121	4.2	890	3.5
1989–90	193	0.7	206	0.8
1990–91	1,016	3.6	1,078	4.1
1991–92	1,864	6.4	1,841	6.7
1992–93	1,611	5.2	1,712	5.9
1993–94	181	0.6	170	0.6
1994–95	1,184	3.6	1,259	4.1
1995–96	639	1.9	564	1.7
1996–97	224	0.7	203	0.6
1997–98[3]	584	1.7	615	1.9
1998–99[4]	402	1.1	547	1.6

[1] 1978–79 to 1996–97 are outturn figures, 1997–98 is forecast outturn and 1998–99 is planned expenditure.

[2] Using GDP deflator of 2 July 1997.

[3] Forecast outturn for 1997–98 includes the extra resources announced for this winter on 14 October.

[4] Planned expenditure for 1998–99 includes the extra £1 billion announced at the 2 July Budget.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made to increase capital spending in the NHS through the private finance initiative. [14062]

Mr. Milburn: The prioritisation of major acute hospital Private Finance Initiative projects and the passing of the National Health Service (Private Finance) Act 1997 in July have resulted in the first two major PFI schemes at Dartford and Gravesham (£115 million) and Carlisle (£87 million) reaching financial close. The other 13 prioritised PFI projects are in the process of having timetables agreed to ensure they all reach financial close by the end of 1998.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list each of the overseas trips made by himself and other members of his ministerial team since 2 May, specifying in each case *(a)* the participating Minister or Ministers, *(b)* the destination of the trip, *(c)* the purpose of the trip and *(d)* the cost of the trip; and if he will make a statement. [15220]

Ms Jowell: Information on the dates, destinations, purpose and cost of overseas visits made by my right hon. Friend and ministerial colleagues since 2 May 1997 is shown in the table.

Secretary of State for Health: None

Minister of State for Health—Alan Milburn: None

Minister of State for Lords—Baroness Jay: None.

Minister of State for Public Health—Tessa Jowell

Date	Destination	Purpose	Cost £
3 June 1997	Amsterdam	Travel with EU Ministers	1,217
4 June 1997	Luxembourg	EU Health Council	1,490
9 July 1997	Brussels	To discuss tobacco advertising	494
26–28 September 1997	Italy	Pontignano conference and relations in Europe—welfare reform, single currency and relations in Europe	273
30 October 1997	Brussels	To meet Members of European Parliament	275

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State—Paul Boateng

Date	Destination	Purpose	Cost £
4–6 June 1997	Brussels	European Social Services Conference	950
16–18 June	Brussels/ Vienna	Council of Europe—Family Affairs	1,300
26–28 September	Italy	Pontignano Conference	Full cost not yet known
23–25 September	Brussels	International Young Peoples Conference	Full cost not yet known

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 12 November 1997

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Beef Industry

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the progress in establishing a computerised cattle traceability system for Great Britain. [15849]

Mr. Rooker: We are continuing to make good progress towards getting this system in place. I announced to the House on 30 July, *Official Report*, column 310, that the organisation responsible for administering the system, the British Cattle Movement Service, (BCMS) will be based in Workington, Cumbria. I also announced subsequently that BCMS will take over responsibility for cattle passports. There are now two further developments to report.

First, the Government consider it very important for there to be as much reporting of cattle movements to the new cattle traceability database by electronic mail as possible. This should reduce the paperwork burden on businesses which move large numbers of cattle, such as livestock markets and abattoirs. To help such businesses, we are issuing a protocol today for them to follow in order to communicate with the database by e-mail. Copies are being sent to all livestock markets and abattoirs in Great Britain. I very much hope that markets and abattoirs will invest in the relatively small changes needed to their IT systems over the next few months. This work needs to start now if it is to be completed by the time the new computerised system goes live in 1998.

Secondly, the Government have decided to charge for the cattle traceability system via cattle passports. Farmers applying for cattle passports will pay a fee which will cover the costs of the new computerised system. This follows consideration of a wide range of alternatives, including charging on the basis of the number of movements for which a business is responsible, charging via ear tags, charging at slaughter and charging via an annual registration fee for cattle producers. Charging via passports was chosen because it should be easy to enforce, since cattle without passports cannot go for human consumption. Because it is simple, administrative costs will be kept down so benefiting industry directly. The fee is expected to be in the range £5 to £10 per animal. The livestock industry will be involved in how this method of charging will be implemented, for example through its representatives on the Project Board which is managing the introduction of the computerised system.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Criminal Courts

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department under what statutory authority people under the age of 14 years are generally barred from the public gallery of criminal courts. [14675]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Michael Huebner to Mr. Peter Bottomley, dated 12 November 1997:

EXCLUSION OF PERSONS UNDER THE AGE OF 14 YEARS FROM THE PUBLIC GALLERIES OF CRIMINAL COURTS.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your Question about the exclusion of children from the public galleries of criminal courts.

The statutory authority is Sections 36 and 37 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

M11 Link Road (East London)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many complaints have been received by his Department in respect of the building of the M11 Link Road through East London. [14480]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since work began in 1993, my Department (including the former Department of Transport and the Highways Agency) have received 174 complaints about the construction of the scheme. There have also been about 1,200 complaints to the Link Road Offices, which were set up specifically to provide a point of contract for local people during construction.

Housing (London)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* local authority and *(b)* housing association homes are in each council tax band in each of the London boroughs. [14822]

Mr. Raynsford: Information is available on the number of local authority and housing association properties in each borough; and on the number of all types of properties in each council tax band in each borough. However, information on tenure by council tax band on which to base a cross-analysis is not available.

Cabinet Environment Committee

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to publish the dates of the meeting of the Cabinet Committee on the Environment. [14731]

Mr. Prescott: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 3 November to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), *Official Report*, column *60*.

Homelessness

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total number of households *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in each London local authority area in respect of which local authorities accepted a duty in each of the last three years where the cause of homelessness was (i) the termination of a private sector assured shorthold tenancy and (ii) housing benefit restrictions. [14819]

Mr. Raynsford: The table below provides the available data on the numbers of households accepted as homeless and in priority need under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts for the calendar years 1994, 1995, 1996 and the first 6 months of 1997. The table also shows the numbers of household where the main reason for the loss of their last settled home was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy. The data collected on the reasons for homelessness do not separately identify where the loss of previous accommodation was attributed to housing benefit restrictions.

1994

	Total priority need acceptances	*Number of these where the reason was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy*[1]
England	118,490	11,830
Barking and Dagenham	280	13
Barnet	648	54
Bexley	156	24
Brent	1,162	163
Bromley	671	97
Camden	1,496	18
City of London	40	1
Croydon	1,272	70
Ealing	1,226	141
Enfield	1,069	65
Greenwich	960	48
Hackney	1,741	134
Hammersmith and Fulham	963	87
Haringey	1,551	93
Harrow	454	50
Havering	325	31
Hillingdon	815	143
Hounslow	942	6
Islington	No returns	No returns
Kensington and Chelsea	[3]416	[2]27
Kingston upon Thames	331	12
Lambeth	1,600	8
Lewisham	[3]581	[3]47
Merton	291	15
Newham	No returns	No returns
Redbridge	461	52
Richmond upon Thames	307	29
Southwark	1,453	[3]87
Sutton	264	32
Tower Hamlets	[3]555	[2]7
Waltham Forest	686	41
Wandsworth	761	[2]16
Westminster	1,257	144

[1] The figures for 1994 to 1996 may include a small number of households accepted for rehousing who were not in priority need.
[2] Data for three quarters only.
[3] Data for two quarters only.

1995

	Total priority need acceptances	*Number of these where the reason was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy*[1]
England	117,490	13,110
Barking and Dagenham	176	15
Barnet	872	138
Bexley	147	41
Brent	1,184	149
Bromley	564	81
Camden	1,474	51
City of London	18	3
Croydon	916	39
Ealing	1,036	158
Enfield	761	83
Greenwich	860	56
Hackney	1,326	83
Hammersmith and Fulham	807	56
Haringey	No returns	No returns
Harrow	508	73
Havering	350	62
Hillingdon	973	130
Hounslow	964	24
Islington	[2]926	[2]51
Kensington and Chelsea	442	31
Kingston upon Thames	419	29
Lambeth	1,439	7
Lewisham	[2]805	[2]85
Merton	325	38
Newham	No returns	No returns
Redbridge	435	65
Richmond upon Thames	364	58
Southwark	1,328	[3]90
Sutton	302	36
Tower Hamlets	821	17
Waltham Forest	586	75
Wandsworth	627	0
Westminster	1,240	171

[1] The figures for 1994 to 1996 may include a small number of households accepted for re-housing who were not in priority need.
[2] Data for three quarters only.

1996

	Total priority need acceptances	*Number of these where the reason was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy*[1]
England	113,560	13,730
Barking and Dagenham	170	8
Barnet	961	148
Bexley	173	74
Brent	1,314	157
Bromley	620	95
Camden	1,379	60
City of London	17	1
Croydon	1,305	75
Ealing	1,368	251
Enfield	833	73
Greenwich	1,081	64
Hackney	[2]830	[2]73
Hammersmith and Fulham	630	40
Haringey	No returns	No returns
Harrow	502	85
Havering	[2]275	[2]28
Hillingdon	897	138
Hounslow	1,088	42

1996

	Total priority need acceptances	*Number of these where the reason was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy*[1]
Islington	1,042	71
Kensington and Chelsea	613	45
Kingston upon Thames	[2]247	[2]20
Lambeth	1,022	10
Lewisham	846	74
Merton	340	41
Newham	[4]224	[4]1
Redbridge	324	72
Richmond upon Thames	472	71
Southwark	[2]719	[3]22
Sutton	412	74
Tower Hamlets	[2]536	[2]17
Waltham Forest	618	64
Wandsworth	670	2
Westminster	1,314	220

[1] The figures for 1994 to 1996 may include a small number of households accepted for re-housing who were not in priority need.
[2] Data for three quarters only.
[3] Data for two quarters only.
[4] Data for one quarter only.

1997—first 6 months

	Total priority need acceptances	*Number of these where the reason was the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy*[1]
England	52,200	6,760
Barking and Dagenham	117	7
Barnet	[2]198	[2]31
Bexley	81	34
Brent	726	110
Bromley	276	49
Camden	630	45
City of London	17	1
Croydon	[2]121	[2]6
Ealing	357	62
Enfield	[2]163	[2]31
Greenwich	506	48
Hackney	[2]129	[2]20
Hammersmith and Fulham	300	20
Haringey	No returns	No returns
Harrow	281	57
Havering	147	20
Hillingdon	450	61
Hounslow	564	48
Islington	491	33
Kensington and Chelsea	No returns	No returns
Kingston upon Thames	178	23
Lambeth	No returns	No returns
Lewisham	[2]159	[2]16
Merton	126	13
Newham	No returns	No returns
Redbridge	126	27
Richmond upon Thames	236	41
Southwark	No returns	No returns
Sutton	161	28
Tower Hamlets	No returns	No returns
Waltham Forest	362	37
Wandsworth	263	2
Westminster	581	124

[1] The figures for 1994 to 1996 may include a small number of households accepted for re-housing who were not in priority need.
[2] Data for one quarter only.

Sewage Flooding

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions with whom the responsibility lies for the repairing of private properties damaged by sewage flooding; and if he will take steps to ensure that there is no undue delay in long-term repair works where flooding is taking place on a regular basis. [15169]

Angela Eagle: Responsibility for repairs to properties following an incident of sewage flooding rests with the property owners but they may be able to recover the cost from sewerage undertakers who can be shown to be at fault. In other cases, the cost of repairs can sometimes be recovered under normal building insurance.

In the periodic review of price limits in 1994, the Director General of Water Services allowed for sewerage undertakers to invest £590 million (at 1993–94 prices) over the following ten-year period to address sewer flooding problems. The Director General's 1996–97 report on levels of service recorded a reduction of 9 per cent. in the number of properties flooded by sewers in that year.

Planning Inspectorate

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ask the Planning Inspectorate to maintain records about the (i) existing and (ii) previous land use, or that previously in existence, when a planning appeal is received. [15156]

Mr. Raynsford: The land uses proposed in development projects being appealed are recorded by the Planning Inspectorate. It has not been considered necessary to record details of existing and previous land uses in planning appeals cases, but a current review will indicate whether full records, including the existing and previous land uses, would be beneficial in future.

Planning Applications

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what procedures exist for ensuring that black and Asian planning applicants are not discriminated against on grounds of race by local authorities. [15285]

Mr. Raynsford: Under section 19A of the Race Relations Act 1976, it is unlawful for a planning authority to discriminate against a person in carrying out their planning functions. Under the 1976 Act, complainants have a right to take their case to the county court as in instances of discrimination in the fields of education, in the provision of goods and services and the disposal and management of premises.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what types of proposed development were involved in each of the applications referred between 5 August 1996 and 3 July 1997 to the Sports Council for England as a statutory consultee under the terms of the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995, as amended. [15164]

Mr. Raynsford: Of the 288 applications referred to the Sports Council for England between 5 August 1996 and 31 July 1997, 177 involved non-sports development as follows:

residential (99 applications);
educational (36);
other commercial development (31); and
other public/community facilities (11).

One hundred and thirty applications involved the development of sports facilities, the most common of which were:

synthetic turf pitches (46 applications);
sports halls/centres (43);
new playing fields and pitches (25);
pavilions/club houses (19);
floodlights (18);
athletics tracks (13);
swimming pools (11).

Some applications contained proposals for more than one new facility.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the outcome has been of each of the planning applications referred to the Sports Council for England as a statutory consultee under the terms of the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) order 1995, as amended with effect from 5 August 1996. [15162]

Mr. Raynsford: Of the 288 applications referred to the Sports Council for England between 5 August 1996 and 31 July 1997, the Council has been notified of 110 local planning authority decisions. Eighty-seven applications were approved including 20 to which they had objected; 16 were refused including nine with Sports Council for England objections; three were withdrawn; and four were called in.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what sports were concerned in respect of each of the 288 planning applications referred between 5 August 1996 and 31 July 1997 to the Sports Council for England. [15163]

Mr. Raynsford: Under the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order, the Sports Council for England is now a statutory consultee in relation to applications for development which affect the use of playing fields. Most playing fields are used for a range of team sports. The Council does not, therefore, have a detailed breakdown of the particular sports affected by the applications referred to them.

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which bodies were consulted about the terms of the Town and Country Planning (Demolition—Description of Buildings) Direction 1995. [15158]

Mr. Raynsford: In 1991, the Department issued a consultation paper on proposed controls over the demolition of dwellinghouses. This was circulated to a wide range of organisations including the local authority associations, individual local planning authorities, the main planning bodies, builders' organisations and conservation bodies. Two hundred and one responses were received including one from the Sports Council. This resulted in the Town and Country Planning (Demolition—Description of Buildings) Direction 1992 contained in Circular 16/92. Some amendments were introduced in the 1995 Direction following a 1994 consultation exercise with a similar range of bodies on the demolition of walls, fences and gates in conservation areas.

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what procedures exist to monitor the processing of planning applications by local authorities to prevent discrimination on racial grounds. [15284]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government recognises the value of ethnic monitoring and we encourage its use where appropriate. Local planning authorities may wish to request information relating to ethnic origin so that they can monitor the handling of applications. The ethnic origin of an applicant is not a relevant planning consideration and there is no obligation for an applicant to provide this information in order to have a planning application decided.

Road Hauliers (French Dispute)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce interest free bridging finance for road hauliers affected by the dispute in France, pending receipt of compensation from the French Government. [15204]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government was pleased to note the promise made by M. Jospin, the French Prime Minister, last week that claimants affected by the blockades in France a year ago will know within three months whether their claims will be met. The Government will be pressing the French Government to ensure that all claims arising from the recent blockades are dealt with sympathetically and promptly.

Compensation claims against the French Government must be made under French Law and by those affected; the UK Government is not directly involved. Unfortunately, many of those adversely affected by the dispute are unlikely to be eligible under French law for compensation. In the circumstances the approach suggested by the hon. Member would not be appropriate.

Wyre Piddle Bypass

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to reach a decision on the application by Hereford and Worcester county council for transport supplementary grant to build the Wyre Piddle bypass; and if he will make a statement. [15595]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We expect to announce our decision on Hereford and Worcester County Council's bid for transport supplementary grant for the Wyre Piddle bypass in December as part of the Local Transport Capital Settlement for 1998–99.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* his Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other

greenhouse gases; if he will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved in the most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate he has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 2010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15544]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the UK's progress in implementing its programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward what the current programme is expected to achieve to 2020.

Waste Disposal

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what data he has collated in respect of the average distances between waste collection points and landfill disposal sites. [14529]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* There are no such data currently available.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on overseas travel for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997; and if he will provide a breakdown to show (1) air fares and (2) other expenditure relating to overseas travel. [15231]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* Figures for years (i) and (ii) are not available. Figures for the Department and its Agencies, where these are available, for years (iii) to (x) are listed below. This information is not held centrally for Non Departmental Public Bodies and the information could only be gathered at disproportionate cost. A breakdown to show air fares and other expenditure is not available.

£000

	Department[1]	*Agencies*[1]
(iii) 1990–91	1,400	232
(iv) 1991–92	1,707	296
(v) 1992–93	2,390	[2]—
(vi) 1993–94	2,156	[2]—
(vii) 1994–95	1,888	476
(viii) 1995–96	1,807	494
(ix) 1996–97	1,601	419
(x) 1 May to 30 September 1997	568	201

[1] Figures include overseas subsistence as well as travel costs.

[2] Figures are not held separately from other travel costs.

Not all the Department's Agencies hold the information in a way that enables the elements requested to be identified separately. We have, therefore, been able to provide information only where it is available. It should also be noted that because of changes in Departmental structure and accountancy practice over the years the year to year costs are not readily comparable.

House Building (Essex)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the number of new homes that need to be built in *(a)* the county of Essex; *(b)* the northern part of Essex; *(c)* the Borough of Colchester and *(d)* the District of Tendring. [15350]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9) was issued by the Secretary of State for the Environment in 1994. It was based on advice provided by the regional conference of local authorities (SERPLAN). The Guidance sets out the additional dwellings required in Essex for the period 1991–2006 as 80,000. Guidance does not give a distribution between districts—this is decided in the Essex structure plan, prepared and adopted by the county council. In accordance with the 1994 Guidance, the pre-deposit consultation draft of the replacement Essex County Structure Plan provides for 84,600 new dwellings in Essex in the period 1995–2011, of which 12,650 would be in the borough of Colchester and 6,500 in the District of Tendring.

SERPLAN is currently preparing advice on the revision of RPG9, including the updating of housing requirements to take into account the latest household projections, economic and environmental factors.

Genetically Modified Maize

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on *(a)* the position taken by his officials and *(b)* the outcome of proceedings at the meeting of the Article 21 Committee, in Brussels, on 5 November, with respect to Austria'a prohibition of genetically modified maize under Article 16 of Directive 90/220 EEC. [15473]

Angela Eagle: I refer the hon. Member to my response to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 6 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *281*.

Food and Drink Outlets

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue new guidancee on the A3 Use Class (Food and Drink) of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 as amended, in order to differentiate between larger and smaller outlets; and if he will make a statement. [14825]

Mr. Raynsford: The Use Classes Order 1987 groups together various types of land use because, in planning terms, they have a similar impact on a neighbourhood. As public houses, wine bars, restaurants and hot food takeaway premises tend to raise the same land use issues, they are all included within Use Class A3. There are no plans to amend or to issue new guidance on this Class, although we keep the arrangements under review.

European Spatial Development Perspective

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to *(a)* take forward the European Spatial Development Perspective and *(b)* obtain European Minister's views on urban issues. [15912]

Mr. Caborn: Our aim under the UK Presidency is to complete, in co-operation with other Member States, the draft European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). The intention is for this to be agreed by EU Ministers at their informal meeting to be held during our Presidency, in June 1998.

The ESDP is the result of collaboration between Member States and the European Commission to promote an integrated approach to spatial development through partnership, co-operation and sharing expertise. A partially completed draft was agreed by Ministers at Noordwijk in June 1997 as a basis for consultations now taking place within each country. This is now on the Internet. In the UK we have invited interested bodies to take part in a series of seminars to discuss the draft document with others and to send us their written views by 31 December.

During December and January, I will undertake a series of bilateral meetings with other European planning ministers and with the Commission and other European institutions, to discuss with them the results of their national consultations. These meetings will seek to ensure that Member States will be in a position to agree the draft ESDP at their meeting in June. Some of these bilateral meetings will be handled by my hon. Friend the Scottish Office Minister with responsibility for local government, housing and transport, the hon. Member for Edinburgh, North and Leith (Mr. Chisholm).

The UK is also planning a European initiative on urban issues based on good practice experience. We will prepare the initial phase of a possible guidance framework on selected aspects of urban policy in consultation with other Member States. This will form the basis for discussion at the EU ministerial meeting in June.

Environmental Impact Assessment Directive

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representation he has received regarding the implementation of Directive 97/11/EC on the assessment of certain public and private projects on the environment; and if he will make a statement. [16029]

Mr. Caborn: A consultation paper was issued on 30 July setting out in broad terms the Government's proposals for implementing the amended Environmental Impact Assessment Directive (97/11/EC). To date, 170 responses have been received from business, government and environmental organizations in the UK, as well as members of the public. A list of the responses has been placed in the Library of the House. Copies of all the responses have also been placed in my Department's library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

ADAPT Training Programme

Ms Jennifer Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many bids were made in 1997 in the United Kingdom under the ADAPT training programme to run from 1997 to 1999; how many bids were successful; and what proportion of the United Kingdom allocated budget has been committed to United Kingdom projects. [14264]

Mr. Andrew Smith: In the United Kingdom, 344 bids were assessed in 1997 under the ADAPT Programme. Of these, 185 were successful. The Programme budget for ADAPT for the period 1995 to 1999 is 316,812,000 Million ECU of which 192,174,790 Million ECU—670.7 per cent.—has been committed to projects. 12,508,706 Million ECU has been allocated to Technical Assistance.

Graduates

Mr. Forth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people graduated from universities in England and Wales in *(a)* arts and humanities, *(b)* science and engineering, *(c)* medicine and *(d)* law in (i) 1967, (ii) 1977, (iii) 1987 and (iv) the most recent available year. [14503]

Dr. Howells: The available data covering all higher education institutions in 1996 and former University Funding Council Universities and former polytechnics for earlier years are given in the following table.

First degree graduates[1] in England and Wales

Thousands

Subject[2]	*Year of graduation*			
	1967	*1977*	*1987*	*1996*
Arts/humanities[3]	n/a	14.1	20.6	52.7
Science and technology	n/a	25.2	36.2	64.6
Medicne[4]	n/a	4.6	6.9	15.1
Social, administrative and business studies[5]	n/a	17.4	20.8	54.8

n/a = not available.

[1] In 1977 and 1987 full-time only for former polytechnics, full and part-time for former UFC universities; full and part-time for all establishments in 1996.

[2] The definitions of the subject groups were revised in 1985 for former UFC establishments, in 1987 for former polytechnics and for all establishments in 1996.

[3] Including education.

[4] Including subjects allied to medicine.

[5] Including law which cannot be separately identified in all years. In 1996 there were 9.3 thousand graduates in law.

Students (Fees)

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to provide financial support for the tuition fee contributions of part-time students in higher education. [14804]

Dr. Howells: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 6 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *309*.

Charity Collectors

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will instruct jobcentres to require organisations seeking charity collectors to provide references from reputable source; and if he will make a statement. [15055]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Adrian Sanders, dated 12 November 1997:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning your request that he instructs Jobcentres to require organisations seeking charity collectors to provide references from a reputable source. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Jobcentres do, in fact, already have instructions not to accept fund-raising vacancies from or on behalf of charities that are not registered with the Charity Commission or, in Scotland, recognised by the Financial Intermediary Claims Office. In addition the Employment Service accepts vacancies which involve street or house to house collections or sales only where the relevant licence or exemptions have been obtained from the appropriate authority. Our current instructions to Jobcentres require these points to be checked whenever there is doubt about an employer seeking to recruit through the Jobcentre.

I hope this is helpful. I would be happy to look into any particular instance which has given cause for concern.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Mr. Jonathan Aitken

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many person hours have been logged in the police investigation into the alleged perjury by Mr. Jonathan Aitken. [15194]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner tells me that 35 man days have been expended so far in the inquiry. The Commissioner informs me that the investigation is continuing and is being pursued as expeditiously as possible.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been spent to date by the Metropolitan police on their investigation into the alleged perjury by Mr. Jonathan Aitken. [15193]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner informs me that approximately 35 man days have been expended so far. The nature of the inquiry has meant that it has not been possible to cost the police time accurately. The Commissioner also tells me that the investigation is continuing and is being pursued as expeditiously as possible.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 5 November, *Official Report*, column *211*, how many police officers, and of which rank, have been assigned to the investigation into the alleged perjury of Mr. Jonathan Aitken. [15195]

Mr. Michael: The Commissioner informs me that the number of officers deployed on the investigation into Mr. Aitken has varied according to the needs of the inquiry. The officers on the inquiry are selected on the basis of the skills they bring to the task, and not according to their rank.

Europol

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if proposals have been put forward through European Union or intergovernmental channels to provide legal immunity for police officers who are working or have worked for Europol; and if he will make a statement. [15190]

Mr. Michael: The privileges and immunities of Europol staff are set out in a Protocol to the Europol Convention, which was signed on 19 June 1997. The Protocol needs to be ratified in each member state before Europol can take up its activities. For the United Kingdom to ratify the Protocol, an Order in Council under the International Organisations Act 1968 will need to be made. We hope to present a draft Order to the House shortly.

The terms of the legal immunity for Europol staff are outlined in Article 8 of the Protocol, which states that members of the organs of Europol and staff members of Europol shall enjoy "immunity form the legal process of any kind in respect of words spoken or written, or of acts performed by them, in the exercise of their official functions". Article 12 of the Protocol states that the Director of Europol shall be required to waive the immunity "in cases where the immunity would impede the course of justice".

It is important to bear in mind that Europol will not have executive powers. Its role is confined to supporting national investigations through facilitating the exchange of information and offering analytical expertise. Responsibility for subsequent executive action rests with the relevant national bodies which do not enjoy such privileges and immunities.

The Protocol will be evaluated by the Management Board of Europol two years after the Protocol enters into force. It will be reviewed following any amendment to the tasks of Europol as set out in the Europol Convention.

Charities

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will issue a practice direction to owners of premises to encourage the reference checking of organisations seeking permission to make charitable collections; [15056]

(2) if he will arrange for local authority licensing departments to be given information on the relevant activities of registered charities; and if he will make a statement. [15054]

Mr. Michael: The Charity Commission meets licensing authorities regularly and seeks to co-operate with any requests for information about charities or fundraising organisations. There are no plans to issue a practice note to owners of premises. The Commission already encourages owners of premises, such as supermarkets, to check with the Commission if they have

any doubts about an organisation seeking permission to carry out a charitable collection. With effect from 29 October this year, basic details of all registered charities can also be checked on the Commission's website at htpp://www.charity-commission.gov.uk.

Gas Appliances (Safety)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have been prosecuted for causing death due to poorly maintained gas appliances in each year since 1990. [15159]

Mr. Michael: The following table gives the information requested. The figures relate to instances where the offence concerned had been recorded by the police as homicide. Figures for similar offences where poor installation rather than poor maintenance was involved are also shown.

Number of prosecutions for offences of homicide arising from poor maintenance or installation of gas appliances—England and Wales

	Poor maintenance	*Poor installation*
1990	—	—
1991	—	—
1992	—	1
1993	—	2
1994	—	—
1995	1	—
1996	—	3
1997 (to 1 August)	3	—

Perjury

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the average length of time between the commission of a perjury and charges being brought by the CPS. [15192]

Mr. Michael: The relevant information is not available. The decision whether to lay a charge of perjury, as of any other offence, is taken by the police in accordance with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, if they are satisfied that they have enough evidence to do so. The time taken will depend on a variety of factors, including the complexity of any case and the extent to which the necessary evidence is obtainable. In reaching that decision, the police may seek the advice of the Crown Prosecution Service as to whether a prosecution should be brought against a suspect.

Chief Constables (Efficiency)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by what means the efficiency of chief constables is measured. [15008]

Mr. Michael: The efficiency of a chief constable, and the means by which it is measured, is a matter for the local police authority.

Police authorities have an obligation under the Police Act 1996 to issue a local policing plan before the start of a financial year, setting out the proposed arrangements for the policing of the authority's area. This plan is produced in conjunction with the chief constable and takes into account objectives determined by the Home Secretary and any objectives and performance targets determined by the police authority.

As soon as possible after the end of the financial year, the authority is required to issue a further report, including, an assessment of the extent to which the local policing plan for that year has been carried out.

At a national level, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Constabulary advise the Secretary of State on the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces.

Police Central Support Department

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the ASTRA clause will be included in any contracts put out to tender for the police central support department. [14697]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office has no plans to use the particular clause referred to, but Home Office policy, when putting services out to competitive tender, is to include a clause in the contract which covers the provisions of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981 (known as TUPE), as amended by the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act 1993.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sudan

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of reports that the NIF regime in Sudan forces school leavers to join the PDF; and if he will make a statement. [15323]

Mr. Fatchett: These reports are accurate. The Sudanese authorities are conscripting secondary school graduates. Some have been sent to the south against their will and without their relatives being informed of their whereabouts. We have expressed our concern about this practice to the Sudanese authorities.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what measures Her Majesty's Government will take to support the Sudanese peace process. [14832]

Mr. Fatchett: We welcomed the resumption of talks between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army on 29 October under the sponsorship of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The UK has supported and will continue to support the IGAD peace process through the Friends of IGAD and latterly through the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF). Both the EU and the IPF have offered material assistance to the IGAD process. We are in regular contact with all parties to the conflict and will continue to stress the need to resolve the civil war through a comprehensive negotiated settlement.

EU Council of Ministers

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in what circumstances it is the practice to permit officials to deputise for Ministers in

meetings of the Council of Ministers of the European Union; and if he will list those Council meetings since 1 May when officials represented their Ministers, naming the Minister in each instance. [15611]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Representation by a senior official on occasions when a Minister is unable to be present for all or part of a Council meeting is normal practice for all member states. British Ministers have attended every Council meeting since 1 May, with the exception of the Consumer Affairs Council on 3 November when my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh, South (Mr. Griffiths) was prevented by fog from reaching Brussels.

EU Standing Orders

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what standing orders have been *(a)* agreed and *(b)* published concerning the procedures to be adopted at (i) Councils of Ministers of the European Community, (ii) the European Council and (iii) intergovernmental conferences of member states; and what are the distinctive functions of European Council and intergovernmental conferences. [15610]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Rules of procedure governing the Council of Ministers are set out in a Council Decision of 6 December 1993 (93/662/EC). This was published in the Official Journal of the European Communities on 10 December 1993 (OJ 1993, No. L304/1).

There are no formal rules of procedure for European Councils and Intergovernmental Conferences. It is for the incumbent Presidency to decide, with the agreement of the Member States, how to conduct them.

The functions of European Councils and Intergovernmental Conferences are set out in Articles D and N respectively of the Treaty on European Union.

European Council

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* Ministers of the Crown and *(b)* officials of Her Majesty's Government were present at the meetings of (i) the European Council and (ii) the intergovernmental conference at Amsterdam. [15612]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Amsterdam Summit comprised (a) the conclusion of the negotiations for the intergovernmental conference and (b) normal European Council business. The UK delegation for the Summit consisted of four Ministers of the Crown and, including support staff, 66 Government officials.

EU General Affairs Council

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will report on the outcome of the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 10 November. [15910]

Mr. Doug Henderson: At the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 10 November the nine A points in document 11996/97 were approved, and the EP resolutions of 20–24 October in document 11109/97 were noted. The texts will be placed in the House as soon as they become available.

The Commission presented a Communication on the future of ACP—EU relations which formed the basis for an orientation debate. This will help inform Commission drafting of an EU mandate for the renegotiation of the Lomé Convention. There was a general welcome for the way ahead set out by the Commission and in particular for the emphasis on poverty, enhanced political dialogue and integration of ACP economies into the world trading environment.

The Council took stock of discussions on enlargement and Agenda 2000. In particular, it considered the role of the Council in the Accession Partnerships of the reinforced pre-accession strategy. The Committee of Permanent Representatives will continue discussion this week.

The Council Secretariat introduced a paper on the incorporation of the Schengen Secretariat into the General Secretariat of the Council. It was agreed that the Schengen Secretariat would be invited to give its opinion on the matter, which will then be discussed further in the Committee of Permanent representatives, before returning to Council.

The Council held a preliminary discussion on the Council Secretary General's paper on implementation of the Declaration annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty on the creation of a Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit. There was wide support for the new CFSPD High Representative taking up his duties as soon as the Amsterdam Treaty is ratified; and for the new Unit to become operational at the same time. The Political Committee and Committee of Permanent Representatives were tasked to take forward detailed work on the Unit and to report back to the Council.

The Council discussed EU relations with Turkey. The Presidency announced its intention to arrange an informal ministerial meeting with Turkey on 24 November.

The Council discussed preparations for the forthcoming visit to the Middle East by the Presidency of the Council and Vice President Marin of the European Commission. The Council agreed on the importance of close co-ordination with the US Administration in support of US efforts to bring about a full resumption of negotiations in the Middle East Peace Process. It also agreed on the need for the Presidency to emphasise EU concerns about the effects of continuing Israeli settlement activity on the prospects for progress and about the postponement of the further redeployments of Israeli troops from Palestinian areas foreseen in the Hebron Agreement.

The Council considered a report from EU Special Envoy Moratinos on ways in which the EU might support agreement between Israel and the Palestinians on the opening of Gaza Airport, the construction of Gaza seaport and the establishment of the "safe passage" arrangements for Palestinians travelling between the West Bank and Gaza. The Council agreed that the report should be considered further at technical level.

The Council discussed negotiations between the EU and Switzerland in the light of new Swiss proposals on the question of land transport through the Alps. It was decided that the Committee of Permanent Representatives should report back to the Council on how the negotiations might be brought to a successful conclusion.

The Presidency reported on preparations and arrangements for the Employment Summit on 21 November.

The Council discussed EU/Albania relations. Ministers agreed that the 1992 Trade and Cooperation Agreement between Albania and the EC should be reactivated to help with the process of economic and political development. A Ministerial level Political Dialogue and official level Joint Committee under the Agreement might be held early in 1998.

The Council adopted a review of the situation in former Yugoslavia in the context of the conditionality in the EU regional approach; and a message to the people of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia setting out the EU's policy. On Bosnia the Council supported the conclusions of the 6 November Steering Board and the High Representative's efforts to reform the Republika Srpska media.

Under any other business, the Council discussed ways of promoting observance by EU Member States of the eight common criteria on arms export agreed by the Council in 1991 and 1992. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs drew partners attention to our intention to work during our Presidency for an EU Code of Conduct of Arms sales.

Sweden highlighted the opportunity presented by the entry into force 1 December 1997 of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA) to tackle some of the irritants in the EU/Russia relationship. Ministers confirmed that a full discussion of the relationship would take place at the 24 November General Affairs Council in preparation for the inaugural Co-operation Council, to be held during the 8–9 December General Affairs Council.

United Nations Register of Conventional Arms

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make available a copy of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms; and if he will make a statement. [15911]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A copy of the UN Secretary-General's report has been placed in the Libraries of the House. We are disappointed that the 1997 Group of Experts reviewing the operation and development of the UN Arms Register was unable to agree any substantive measures to expand or strengthen the Register. Our aims remain clear: to encourage increased participation by UN member states; to broaden the scope of the Register by including military holdings and procurement from national production on the same basis as imports and exports; to expand current categories of equipment to include weapons of lesser capability; and to encourage the provision of details of the type of equipment transferred. We shall continue to use both bilateral and multilateral contacts to encourage States to work towards these goals. We welcome the Group of Experts' agreement on recommendations for several technical adjustments. We fully endorse these recommendations and urge other States to do the same.

Commonwealth Centre Event

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the Commonwealth Centre event held in Edinburgh during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. [15961]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The first ever "Commonwealth Centre" highlighted the importance of the role of non-governmental organisations in the Commonwealth. With our full support, the Commonwealth Centre—led by the Royal Commonwealth Society and supported by the Commonwealth Foundation, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, the British Council and the Prince's Trust—hosted a full programme of conferences, discussions, workshops and exhibitions by over 100 organisations. It was a tremendous success. Over 25,00 members of the public and 20 Heads of Government, led by my right honourable Friend the Prime Minister and the Commonwealth Secretary General, visited the Centre.

Assisted Areas

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the Government's strategy for maintaining the maximum number of objective 1 and 2 assisted areas in the United Kingdom after 1999. [15030]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

The European Commission published its suggestions for the future of the Structural and Cohesion Funds on 16 July as part of its communication "Agenda 2000". In discussions with the Commission and other Member States, the Government are pressing for future arrangements which are affordable, durable and fair to the United Kingdom as well as to other Member States.

TREASURY

Correspondence

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the average time taken by his Department to give full answers to letters received from hon. Members. [13959]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) on 3 November 1997, *Official Report,* column 5. The 1997 figures will be published in due course.

Taxation (Marginal Rates) Deduction

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people of working age currently face combined marginal rates of withdrawal of tax, national insurance contributions and means-tested benefits of *(a)* under 50 per cent., *(b)* 50–69 per cent., *(c)* 60–69 per cent., *(d)* 70–79 per cent., *(e)* 80–89 per cent. and *(f)* 90 per cent. or above. [14022]

Dawn Primarolo: Figures for the number of families estimated to be facing high marginal deduction rates, for 1996–97 are contained in the following table:

Marginal deduction rate (per cent.)	*Number at or above the rate (thousands)*
100+	5
90+	105
80+	360
70+	645
60+	655
50+	660

Source:
Based on Family Resources Survey, uprated to 1996–97 levels, adjusted to benefit caseloads using Housing Benefit Management Statistics and the Family Credit Statistical Sample. Figures are calculated for benefit units in receipt of income-related benefits where at least one partner works 16 hours a week or more.

National Audit Office

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will take steps to extend the powers of the National Audit Office to enable it to have access to the financial records of any organisation which has received public money; and if he will make a statement. [14476]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have no plans to introduce legislation in this area.

Taxation Changes

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the income which would have accrued to the Treasury in each year if income tax rates had remained unchanged after the 1979 general election; [14706]

(2) if he will estimate the additional income, which would have accrued to the Treasury in each year if the four top rates of income tax had not been abolished in March 1988. [14705]

Dawn Primarolo: Such an analysis could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Taxation (Married Couples)

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the Government's policy to retain the independent taxation of husband and wife. [14941]

Dawn Primarolo: All aspects of the tax system are kept under review to ensure it achieves the Government's objectives.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14955]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* Since April 1991, when the Treasury installed a central, computerised procurement system, no contract has been let to the Monitor Consultancy. A check of all file titles since 1990 has yielded no record of any contract between 1990 and April 1991 or of any discussions between Ministers, Officials and the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. An exhaustive check of relevant files could only be undertaken at disproportionate cost.

Intelligence Services

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer who was responsible for drawing up the terms of reference for the comprehensive spending review of the intelligence agencies. [14514]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* The Terms of Reference were approved by Ministers after inter-departmental consultation including the Security and Intelligence Agencies.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the individuals who will undertake the comprehensive spending review of the Intelligence Services announced on 30 October; what arrangements have been made to make public the outcome; and when the review will be complete. [14512]

Mr. Gordon Brown: Staff from the Cabinet Office, the Security and Intelligence Agencies and the Efficiency Unit will undertake the review. Ministers will decide if the outcome of the review should be published. The review will follow the comprehensive spending review timetable and will be completed by summer 1998.

Competition Legislation

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 27 October, *Official Report,* column 587, what will be the scope of the new competition legislation; and with which bodies he *(a)* has consulted and *(b)* proposes to consult. [15357]

Mrs. Liddell: The Chancellor of the Exchequer was referring to the Competition Bill, which was introduced in the Hose of Lords on 15 October. A consultation document on the Bill was published in August by the President of the Board of Trade.

Energy-saving Materials

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to reduce VAT on energy-saving materials. [15465]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs have completed their review on this subject and are now preparing a report for publication.

Official Reserves (Reports)

Mr. Timms: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the publication arrangements will be for the new quarterly report on the official reserves, and if he will make a statement. [16117]

Mrs. Liddell: A report on the reserves in July—September 1997 will be published by the Treasury on Tuesday 2 December. Subsequent quarterly reports will be published two months after the end of the quarter concerned. The report will include data on any holdings by the Bank of England. This follows the Chancellor's statement on 6 May that the Bank will have its own separate pool of foreign exchange reserves which it may use at its discretion to intervene in support of its monetary policy objective.

Monetary Policy Committee

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment of Scotland's current economic conditions was taken into account by the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee in reaching its recent decision to raise interest rates. [15519]

Mrs. Liddell: In reaching its decision to raise interest rates on 6 November, the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) was able to draw on the information gained from business surveys and from the Bank's network of 12 regional agents which cover the whole of the United Kingdom. The Bank has an agency in Glasgow, which is able to obtain a first-hand account of economic conditions in Scotland. Detailed reasons for the interest rate change will be made clear in the MPC minutes, which will be published on 10 December.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 November. [14220]

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 12 November. [15184]

The Prime Minister: This morning I had meetings with Ministerial colleagues and others. I shall have further meetings later today.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

HMS Cavalier

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will take steps to ensure the retention and display in the United Kingdom of HMS Cavalier. [15040]

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to ensure that HMS Cavalier is retained in the United Kingdom. [15518]

Mr. Fisher: The sale of HMS Cavalier has been agreed between South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council and Star Cruises of Malaysia. South Tyneside MBC has maintained the ship for 10 years, but now considers the costs too great to continue. The agreement secured with the purchasers means that the ship will be maintained in a good state of repair.

It is not yet clear whether HMS Cavalier requires an export licence on heritage grounds from my Department since there is as yet no firm valuation for the ship. If it is decided that a licence is required, HMS Cavalier will be subject to the normal considerations as to whether a licence should be granted or the decision deferred.

We owe a great debt to those who served in the Navy and I appreciate that the future of HMS Cavalier is a matter of importance to them.

Tourism (Hotels)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, media and Sport how many hotels offered accommodation in the United Kingdom in each of the last 10 years. [14565]

Mr. Tom Clarke *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* The table shows the number of establishments listed as hotels[1] by the English, Scottish, Wales and Northern Ireland tourist boards for each year from 1987 to 1996 inclusive. Figures are not available in the form requested for 1989 in Scotland and for 1993 in England and Wales.

[1] The term hotels is defined in a generic sense in England, Scotland and Wales, as it has not proved possible to disaggregate hotels from other types of serviced accommodation.

Year	*England*[1]	*Scotland*[2]	*Wales*[2]	*Northern Ireland*
1987	24,218	2,969	1,462	130
1988	23,692	2,997	1,589	125
1989	22,936	n/a	1,456	120
1990	22,547	3,285	1,620	122
1991	22,293	2,885	1,512	126
1992	22,007	2,885	1,744	126
1993	n/a	2,927	n/a	122
1994	19,073	2,876	1,438	122
1995	18,838	2,841	1,415	126
1996	18,709	2,080	1,397	129

[1] In England, the figures include hotels, motels, inns and guesthouses.

[2] In Scotland and Wales the figures include motels and inns but not guesthouses.

Communications Sector Regulation

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures he is taking to provide a single independent body to regulate the communications sector. [14575]

Mr. Fisher: The Government are considering the policy implications of convergence between broadcasting, telecommunications and computing. As part of this work, we will be considering whether and how we might make the structure of regulation more appropriate to any new market structures which might emerge.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Export Licences

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the export licences revoked by her Department since 1990; and what is the practice of her Department regarding the payment of compensation to the licensees. [13322]

Mrs. Roche: Over the years, a large number of standard individual export licences have been revoked for a range of reasons; for instance, because of the introduction of UN trade sanctions or arms embargos or in response to wrongdoing. It would entail disproportionate cost to provide details of all these licences.

The practice of this Department is to pay compensation for revocation of export licences only where the Department incurs a legal liability as a result of the revocation.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what was the original cost of the Export Licence Information Processing System; and how much it will cost to develop a new database. [15302]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* The cost of developing the Export Control Licensing Information Processing System (ECLIPS), up to point of implementation in March 1995, is put at £4,447,600.

Development of a new database of export licence applications and establishing a system to enable such applications to be submitted in electronic form is expected to cost £424,000.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions she has had or plans to have with her World Trade Organisation counterparts on the problems facing computer systems through the century date change; and if she will make a statement. [13149]

Mrs. Roche: I have no plans to raise this at the WTO, but I will look to raise the issue in more appropriate international fora.

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what discussions she has had or plans to have with her EU counterparts on the problems facing computer systems through the century date change; and if she will make a statement. [13154]

Mrs. Roche: I plan to raise this at the Telecommunications Council on 1 December and in bilateral meetings with other Member States.

Multilateral Agreement on Investment

Dr. Tonge: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if it is her policy to adopt the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment in its current form; and if she will make a statement. [15168]

Mrs. Roche: The Government support the general aims of the proposed MAI. Many issues remain to be resolved. We are working hard to achieve a successful outcome to the negotiations by April 1998.

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will estimate the number of British firms which have offices in Yemen. [14975]

Mrs. Roche: According to the latest information I have there are 20 British firms with offices in Yemen.

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what action she is taking to promote trade and investment in Yemen. [14977]

Mrs. Roche: In partnership with the private sector, other Government departments and the British Embassy, the Department of Trade and Industry supports a full programme of activities to promote trade and investment in Yemen.

Recent activities include: an inward mission of Yemeni business women in May, the Committee for Middle East Trade Round Table meeting between the private sectors of Yemen and Britain in September, an Invest in Yemen seminar in London in September, a DTI supported trade mission to Yemen in September led by HRH the Duke of Gloucester; a DTI seminar addressed by the Yemeni Minister of Health in October, a joint DTI and British Council workshop and forum in October at the House of Commons on Women and Economic Development in Yemen.

Planned future activities include: the President of the Board of Trade and the Minister for Trade the President of Yemen during his visit to Britain in November; the Minister for Trade's visit to Yemen in November; catalogue exhibitions featuring British companies' goods and services Aden, Taiz and Sana'a in November; at least four DTI supported trade missions to Yemen in the first half of 1998, including one on the oil and gas sector and another on tourism, and a further inward mission of Yemeni businesswomen. In conjunction with the British Council the DTI will facilitate the setting-up in Sana'a of a training and advice centre for businesswomen in Yemen.

DTI has also initiated a twinning arrangement between the Chambers of Commerce of Sana'a and London.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the typical quantities of carbon dioxide emitted at each stage of processing in the nuclear fuel cycle for each tonne of nuclear fuel fabricated and used to generate electricity. [14717]

Mr. Battle: It is estimated that nuclear electricity generation leads to emission of about 4 grams of carbon dioxide per kilowatt hour of electricity delivered to the final user. Of theses 4 grams, 3.2 grams are emitted in the process of uranium extraction and the remainder during fuel processing.

Carbon dioxide emissions from nuclear generation are less than 1 per cent. of equivalent figures for any of the major fossil fuelled electricity generation technologies.

Low Pay Commission

Dr. Kumar: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the progress made by the Low Pay Commission; and if it will publish an interim report. [15035]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Low Pay Commission is well advanced on its programme of consultation to obtain views of employers, employees and other interested organisations and individuals on the National Minimum Wage through written evidence and by holding meetings. It has already visited Scotland and Northern Ireland. It will be visiting the North-East in early December and the other English regions and Wales in the near future. The Government have asked the Commission to produce its recommendations by the end of May 1998 and there are no plans for it to publish an interim report.

Copyright

Mr. Stunell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to bring forward legislation to amend copyright law to take account of the proposals and recommendations set out in the Dearing report; and if she will make a statement. [15622]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have no plans at present to bring forward legislation to amend copyright law in the light of this report. Copyright law allows limited use of material without permission for education, private study and research. Moreover, the draft regulations, which have recently been laid before the House, to implement the UK and EC legislation on databases, also contain exceptions for the purposes of teaching and non-commercial research with regard to databases protected by copyright and/or the new database right. Where copyright clearance is needed for uses of any material, digital or otherwise, I believe that copyright owners are entitled to obtain a suitable reward on their investment. However, I understand that there are discussions between the Publishers Association and the Joint Information Systems Committee on a licensing scheme covering digital material and specifically designed to meet the needs of teachers and researchers. I very much hope that a successful scheme can be devised.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list *(a)* her Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other greenhouse gases; if she will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved in the most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate she has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 21010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15550]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the UK's progresss in implementing its programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward what the current Programme is expected to achieve to 2020.

Film Industry

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what is her Department's estimate of the number of people working in the United Kingdom film industry. [15449]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The number of people working in the United Kingdom film industry in the spring of 1997 is estimated to be 40,000, of whom about 20,000 were involved in film production activities. The remainder were involved in film distribution and projection activities.

Biotechnology

Dr. Gibson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if the Government will ensure that full consultation on the EC directive on legal protection of biotechnological inventions takes place before it agrees to a decision at the Council of Ministers meeting on 27 November. [15340]

Mr. Battle: The Commission's proposals for a Directive on the legal protection of biotechnological inventions was circulated for comment in February 1996 to some 50 organisations and interests groups representing the professions, industry, consumers, the research community, groups concerned with the social and environmental impact of biotechnology, and including members organisations of the Standing Advisory Committee on Industrial Property, a body set up to advise Ministers on all aspects of industrial property.

Interest in the Commission's proposals has increased since the European Parliament adopted its first Opinion in July of this year. To date, more that 150 organisations have received copies of the Commission's revised draft of the proposal which was produced in September in response to the Parliament's first Opinion. Comments have been received from these organisations, and we will take them all into account in determining the United Kingdom's position when this proposal is considered at the Internal Market Council on 27 November.

Dr. Gibson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research she has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated to determine the impact of the Bio-technology Patent directive on (i) research in the medical field, (ii) world food supplies, (iii) conservation of biological diversity and (iv) agriculture in the developing world. [15343]

Mr. Battle: No specific research has been done to determine the impact of the Directive since the European Commission's proposal for legal protection of bio-technological inventions, apart from certain exclusions from patentability for ethical reasons, is substantially consistent with current United Kingdom legislation (the Patents Act 1997).

Moreover, United Kingdom legislation provides for exceptions to patent rights to permit research in all technical areas, including the medical field. The Commission's proposal will permit individual member States, including the United Kingdom, to retain provisions which address the needs of those wishing to carry out research relating to patented inventions.

Patent rights are created under national legislation. The proposed Directive will harmonise certain aspects of the national laws of the member States of the European Union, but rights will continue to be available only on a national basis. It is for other countries, including those in the developing world, and subject to minimum standards required from members of the World Trade Organisation, to provide patent regimes which meet their own needs and objectives. There is, therefore, no direct relationship between the Commission's proposal and matters outside Europe.

The Commission's proposal makes it clear that the Directive is without prejudice to member States' obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Post Office (Scottish Powercards)

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make representations to the managements of Post Office Counters and Scottish Power about the case for reinstating the supply of Scottish Powercards through post offices. [15356]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No. I regard this as a commercial matter for Post Office Counters Ltd. and Scottish Power.

Milk Development Council Tax

Mr. Brady: To ask the President of the Board of Trade, what representations her Department has received from the dairy industry regarding the tax treatment of the Milk Development Council under section 508 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988. [15551]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I have received representations from the National Farmers Union, the Tenant Farmers Association and the Milk Development Council itself regarding the Council's eligibility for approval under the provision.

CABINET OFFICE

Millennium Dome

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio, what is his estimate of the total cost of completing the Millennium Dome at Greenwich; what are the sources of finance for the project; and if he will make a statement. [13273]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The overall budget for the Experience and the associated national programme is £758 million. The Millennium Commission have approved grant of up to £399 million (net) and revenue forecast from sponsorship, commercial activities, visitor receipts and disposal proceeds are £359 million (net).

Millennium Experience Company

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Minister without Portfolio when he intends to reply to the questions from the hon. and learned Member for Medway which appeared on the Order Paper on 27 October relating to the new Millennium Experience Company. [15689]

Mr. Mandelson: The questions referred to by my hon. and learned Friend were answered yesterday.

WALES

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to the oral statement by the Secretary of State for International Development, *Official Report*, 5 November, column 332, if he will instruct officials in his Department to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards. [15501]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I refer to the answer which the Prime Minister has given today. All procurement decisions in the Welsh Office are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

SCOTLAND

Electorate

Mr. Doran: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the electorate of each parliamentary constituency in Scotland *(a)* for parliamentary elections, *(b)* for local government elections and *(c)* the referendum on establishment of a Scottish Parliament. [12698]

Mr. McLeish: The information for parliamentary elections is set out in the table. Statistics for local government elections and the referendum by parliamentary constituency are not held centrally. Inquiries are currently being made to see if this information can be obtained and I will write to the hon. Member.

	Electorate
Aberdeen Central	54,548
Aberdeen North	54,895
Aberdeen South	60,982
Airdrie and Shotts	58,255
Angus	60,359
Argyll and Bute	49,982
Ayr	56,455
Banff and Buchan	59,189
Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross	41,953
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	66,392
Central Fife	58,884
Clydebank and Milngavie	52,643
Clydesdale	64,048
Coatbridge and Chryston	52,547
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	48,590
Cunninghame North	56,147
Cunninghame South	50,234
Dumbarton	56,875
Dumfries	63,360
Dundee East	58,790
Dundee West	57,809
Dunfermline East	52,530
Dumfermline West	53,005
East Kilbride	65,915
East Lothian	57,988
Eastwood	67,525
Edinburgh Central	63,969
Edinburgh East and Musselburgh	60,097
Edinburgh North and Leith	61,962
Edinburgh Pentlands	60,338
Edinburgh South	62,949
Edinburgh West	61,715
Falkirk East	57,331
Falkirk West	53,308
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	53,273
Glasgow Anniesland	53,324
Glasgow Baillieston	51,589
Glasgow Cathcart	49,765
Glasgow Govan	50,150
Glasgow Kelvin	57,695
Glasgow Maryhill	52,854
Glasgow Pollok	49,693
Glasgow Rutherglen	51,106
Glasgow Shettleston	48,270
Glasgow Springburn	53,814
Gordon	59,503
Greenock and Inverclyde	49,364

	Electorate
Hamilton North and Bellshill	54,158
Hamilton South	47,023
Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber	66,278
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	62,091
Kirkcaldy	52,618
Linlithgow	54,258
Livingston	60,944
Midlothian	48,045
Moray	58,957
Motherwell and Wishaw	52,702
North East Fife	59,532
North Tayside	62,007
Ochil	57,170
Orkney and Shetland	32,621
Paisley North	50,261
Paisley South	54,573
Perth	60,887
Ross, Skye and Inverness West	56,141
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	47,739
Stirling	53,069
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	63,822
Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale	51,448
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	59,884
West Renfewshire	53,096
Western Isles	23,293

Community Care

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he is taking to implement the recommendations contained in the second report of Session 1996–97 (HC 35) of the Scottish Affairs Committee relating to community care. [13967]

Mr. Galbraith: We welcomed the Scottish Affairs Committee report on community care and our response to the recommendations was published in July. The Government is setting up a Royal Commission on the funding of long-term care for the elderly. We are reviewing the various elements of community care funding and preparing improved guidance on procedures for assessment of older people's needs. We will consult later this year on how best to promote and improve joint working. These measures should maximise quality, choice and value for money in the delivery of community care services.

Local Authority Services

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* total outturn capital receipts generated for each service, *(b)* total capital receipts generated by way of long leases and *(c)* the net capital allocations originally granted for each service for each local authority in Scotland in 1994–95. [14932]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* As the information requested is rather lengthy, I have arranged for it to be placed in the House libraries. Information on notional capital receipts is not held separately in respect of the housing revenue account and non-housing revenue account capital programmes.

School Buildings (East Lothian)

Mr. Home Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what has been the cost to public funds of the current investigation by the Accounts Commission into the investment of £7 million for repairs and improvements to schools by the former East Lothian district council; and if he will make a statement. [14933]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* The preparation and consideration of the report by the Accounts Commission for Scotland fall within the statutory duties of the Controller of Audit and have not involved any additional expenditure. It would be inappropriate to comment on the matter under consideration as my right hon. Friend may have to consider the matter if it is referred to him by the Commission.

DEFENCE

Military Training and Equipment

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria are used to determine which requests for military training by overseas security forces should be granted. [15198]

Dr. Reid: Requests for training are considered in the light of the Government's ethical foreign policy. Training would not be provided where we considered that it would risk contributing to human rights violations or aggression. Other criteria used to determine which requests for military training by overseas security forces should be granted include: the availability of resources to carry out the training; security considerations; and the defence and foreign policy benefits of providing the training. The defence policy benefits taken into account include in particular whether the provision of military assistance would:

- bring direct benefit to the United Kingdom by (for example by providing access to training areas);
- represent an investment to avoid later expense (for example by averting a conflict in an area where there would be a high likelihood to British forces being committed);
- help to build military interoperability with key potential partners;
- maintain existing close defence links;
- support defence sales.

Fleet Air Arm (826 Squadron)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the 826 Squadron of the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm was established; what has been its role since it was established; with what aircraft it has been equipped since it was established; what is its current role and strength; and where it has been based. [15616]

Dr. Reid: Number 826 Squadron was originally to have formed at Lee-on-Solent on 1 January 1940 as a spare squadron, but instead came into existence at Ford on 15 March 1940. The role of the squadron was originally torpedo spotter reconnaissance but became strike and anti-submarine in 1951 and finally anti-submarine in 1955.

The squadron has been equipped with the following aircraft types (in chronological order):

- Albacore I
- Swordfish I
- Barracuda II (ASH)
- Firefly FR1
- Firefly T1
- Avenger TBM-3E

Firefly AS6
Gannet ASI
Wessex HASI
Wessex HAS3
Seaking HASI
Seaking HAS2/2a
Seaking HAS56

The squadron has been based at the following locations:

Ford
Bircham Newton
Eastern Mediterranean
Western Desert
Cyprus
Malta
Algeria
East Haven
Fearn
Dartmouth, Nova Scotia (Royal Canadian Navy)
RNAS Culdrose, Helston, Cornwall

826 Naval Air Squadron was disbanded at Culdrose in July 1993.

Merchant Vessels

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the importance his Department attaches to the role of British merchant vessels and merchant seafarers during *(a)* peacetime exercises, *(b)* support and re-supply operations and *(c)* times of crisis and war. [15434]

Dr. Reid: The Government fully recognise the importance of British merchant shipping and seafarers in the defence context. Indeed, the Department maintains one of the largest civilian fleets in Europe in the form of the specialist ships and civilian crews of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service.

We must acknowledge, however, that in today's security environment, a substantial element of any logistic shipping requirement can be satisfied through the international market, where vessels need not necessarily have to be British flagged or crewed as demonstrated during the Gulf War, and in subsequent operations and exercises. The Ministry of Defence is always eager to charter British flagged and crewed ships where they offer best value for money, but we have found that, in general, they are normally fully committed to regular trading activities. Nevertheless, so far during 1997, 24 British registered merchant ships have been on charter to the Ministry of Defence.

While we would plan in any serious crisis or war to charter shipping on the worldwide market, we are very conscious that a core of suitable British flagged or owned ships, which could be used under compulsory measures and manned by UK seafarers, is important.

My Department's future requirements for merchant shipping will, of course, follow on from the conclusions of the Strategic Defence Review.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the name of each merchant vessel, and its country of registration, chartered by his Department for *(a)* exercises and *(b)* military support and re-supply operations since 1 January. [15435]

Dr. Reid: The names of merchant vessels and their country of registration for *(a)* exercises (including training) and *(b)* military support and resupply operations since 1 January 1997 are as follows:

Names	*Country of registration*
Vessels chartered for exercises (including training)	
Cap Afrique	France
Dana Maxima	Denmark
Danica Red	Denmark
Guyane	St. Vincent and Grenadines
Jenka	Denmark
King of Scandinavia	Denmark
Norbay	Great Britain
Norking	Finland
Norcape	Great Britain
Pride of Flanders	Great Britain
Pride of Suffolk	Great Britain
Prince of Scandinavia	Denmark
Roseanne	Switzerland
Vega (x 2)	Antigua
Villars	Switzerland
Vessels chartered for military support and resupply operations	
Afon Cefni	Great Britain
Arktis Carrier	Denmark
Ben Ellen	Great Britain
Ben Maye	Great Britain
Bergen Viking	Bahamas
Bostonian	Great Britain
Cameron	Great Britain
Cap Afrique (x 3)	France
Cardissa	Isle of Man
Eurogracht	Germany
Fleur de Lyse	Spain
Indomitable*	Great Britain
Jolly Indaco	Italy
Julia M	Great Britain
Karin Cat	Denmark
Katherine Lucy	Great Britain
Llandovery	Great Britain
Loyal Mediator	Great Britain
Marine Explorer*	Great Britain
Maersk Ascension*	Isle of Man
Maersk Bothnia	Norway
Maersk Gannet*	Isle of Man
Navigo	Sweden
Northella*	Great Britain
Oil Mariner*	Great Britain
Proud Seahorse*	Great Britain
Rundale	Liberia
San Vincente	Germany
Saint Brandan*	Great Britain
Sea Maid	Great Britain
Siren	Great Britain
Ulla	Cyprus
Vega	Antigua
Villars (x 2)	Switzerland
Virgo	Cyprus
Zeran	Malta

Some vessels were chartered on more than one occasion and those indicated with an asterisk are on long term charter.

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of United Kingdom merchant vessels available to meet defence needs; and if he will make a statement. [15433]

Dr. Reid: The availability of militarily useful British merchant ships which might be used for defence purposes is kept under regular review as part of our normal planning process. Current figures indicate there are generally enough militarily useful ships for perceived defence needs. My Department, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, regularly monitors the position. The hon. Member will understand that our future requirements for merchant shipping will, of course, follow on from the conclusions of the Strategic Defence Review.

Bosnia

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he is taking to compensate those Territorial Army personnel deployed in Bosnia to whom backpay is still owed. [15332]

Dr. Reid: Contrary to recent media reports, there is no endemic or general problem affecting the pay of mobilised TA personnel serving in Bosnia. Mobilised TA personnel are treated as Regular Army for pay purposes and as such were not affected by the separate problems unfortunately experienced by their non-mobilised TA colleagues, which arose from an unforeseen backlog caused by the transfer of work to the Army Personnel Centre (APC) in Glasgow.

I regret that isolated problems have, however, affected the pay and allowances of a limited number of mobilised TA personnel. These stemmed mainly from incomplete or incorrect mobilisation documentation, particularly during early mobilisation exercises. Individual cases have been dealt with as they have arisen, and the Army very much regrets any difficulty caused to affected personnel or their families. I can assure the hon. Gentlemen that affected individuals have had access, as a temporary measure, to financial assistance from their Units until the underlying problems could be resolved.

Because such problems affect individuals in different ways, there can be no automatic mechanisms or all-embracing compensation package. But any individual who has incurred additional expense, such as bank overdraft charges, as a result of pay problems not of their making may apply for reimbursement, subject to the provision of supporting documentary evidence. Claims should be sent to the Pay Division of the APC through the appropriate Regimental Administrative Office.

As a result of the experience gained and lessons learned from these cases, such problems have been largely overcome. Also in the light of this experience, active consideration is being given by the APC—in conjunction with other parties involved in the mobilisation process—to the formation of a permanent mobilisation centre manned with staff experienced in such procedures. The aim is to ensure that there is a more focused approach in order to minimise the occurrence of initial errors which can have serious implications for pay and other matters.

MOD Police

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to outresource the duties now undertaken by the MOD police. [15329]

Dr. Reid: The Strategic Defence Review (SDR) is looking at all aspects of defence capability. Whilst I have no plans to outresource any of the duties of the Ministry of Defence Police, it is too early to assess the potential impact of the SDR on the Force.

Territorial Army

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what advice he has received from the Territorial Army brigadiers concerning the size, shape and future role of the Territorial Army. [15334]

Dr. Reid: The future size, shape and role of the Territorial Army will be determined by the Strategic Defence Review. We are consulting very widely in the course of this work. In particular I expect to have discussions shortly with Brigadier Holmes, who took up his responsibilities as Director of Reserve Forces and Cadets this month. Other members of the TA, like all Service personnel, are welcome to make submissions direct to the Review Team.

Departmental Open Day

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to hold a departmental open day. [15337]

Dr. Reid: There are no plans at present for a central departmental open day. Considerable effort is put into publicising the work of the Department and the individual Services. My Department has an annual touring exhibition, the Services Presentation Teams provide information on MOD and the Services, and many individual units and bases hold local open days.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 31 July, *Official Report,* column *470*, what was the aim of Exercise Senator 97; what was the scenario of the exercise; and what were the results of the exercise. [15608]

Dr. Reid: The aim of Exercise Senator 97 was to test procedures in the event of an accident involving nuclear weapons on British territory. The scenario postulated an accident involving a nuclear weapons convoy in transit through Lincolnshire. There has been unanimous agreement from participants that the exercise was a success, and a number of observations are being followed up with appropriate agencies. A copy of the summary report from all participating agencies will be placed in the Library of the House in due course.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence where are the headquarters of the RAF Nuclear Accident Response Organisation. [15559]

Dr. Reid: The Headquarters of the RAF Nuclear Accident Response Organisation is based at the Headquarters of the RAF Logistics Command at RAF Brampton, Huntingdon.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many editions of the local authority and emergency service information on nuclear weapon transport contingency plans have been produced since 1967; and on what dates. [15617]

Dr. Reid: Two editions of the Local Authority and Emergency Service Information on Nuclear Weapon Transport Contingency Plans (LAESI) document have been produced by the Ministry of Defence. The first edition was issued in January 1993 and the second edition in March 1996.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received from other Government Departments concerning the Strategic Defence Review; and whether he intends publishing them. [15594]

Mr. George Robertson: Other Government Departments have been, and will continue to be, consulted throughout the Strategic Defence Review process. Their inputs represent internal Government advice and opinion and are therefore covered by exemption 2 (Internal discussion and advice) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. We have no plans to publish them.

Strategic Defence Review

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he plans to publish the Strategic Defence Review in association with 1998–99 Defence Estimates; and if he will make a statement. [15336]

Mr. George Robertson: The 1998–99 estimates for defence votes will be published as part of the Main Supply Estimates in March 1998. The results of the Strategic Defence Review will be published separately at the conclusion of the Review.

WE-177 Bomb

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 31 July, *Official Report*, column *473*, in what ways the three types of WE-177 bomb are different from each other. [15602]

Dr. Reid: The three types of WE-177 bomb differed in terms of weight, size and yield. I am withholding detailed information about these weapons as it is covered under exemption 1 of the code of practice on access to Government information relating to defence security and international relations.

Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list by appointment the selection committee for nominating the 4 star general for the post of Deputy SACEUR. [15331]

Dr. Reid: A candidate for the 4 star NATO post of Deputy SACEUR is nominated by the Senior Appointments Committee, which comprises the Chief and Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, and the Chiefs of the Naval, General and Air Staffs.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will name those British officers who have held the post of Deputy SACEUR and who have *(a)* subsequently served on the Army Board and *(b)* become Chief of the General Staff. [15330]

Dr. Reid: None.

HMS Tiger

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 31 July, *Official Report* column *469*, when the HMS Tiger cruiser was decommissioned. [15609]

Dr. Reid: The cruiser HMS Tiger was decommissioned on 4 May 1979.

Helicopters

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which NATO countries separate the command, control and ownership of attack and support helicopters between the army and air force. [15328]

Dr. Reid: Among NATO countries only the United Kingdom separates the ownership of anti-tank and support helicopters, between the Army and Royal Air Force respectively. The Strategic Defence Review is examining a range of options for the structure and management of the three Services' helicopter forces.

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the cost benefits to his Departmental budget of combining attack and support helicopters under one service. [15327]

Dr. Reid: The Strategic Defence Review is examining a range of options for the structure and management of the three Services' helicopter forces, which will be costed as appropriate. It would be premature to discuss particular options at this stage in the Review process.

Ministry Buildings

Mr. Olner: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of his Department's plans for modernisation of the MoD Main Building in Whitehall. [16062]

Mr. George Robertson: My Department continues to examine options, under the Public-Private Partnership scheme, for the long overdue modernisation of the Main Building and its subsequent support. The building was constructed in the 1950s and does not meet today's needs. A major programme of work is required to correct the many current deficiencies and to provide a modern working environment, flexibility for the future and more cost effective use of space.

Following the recently completed evaluation of outline proposals, I have approved the next stage of the project which involves the issue of an Invitation to Negotiate to a shortlist of three consortia: Amey/Kvaerner, MoDeM (led by the Bucknall Group) and Mapeley Defence (led by the Nations Bank).

I am keen to see the project proceed, and I am encouraged by the outline proposals put forward by the three selected consortia. The next stage challenges the consortia to work closely with my Department to demonstrate their ability to come up with a winning and good-value-for-money scheme.

Detailed responses from the consortia will be closely reviewed in the course of the next year as the competition proceeds. Final approval to sign a contract for the scheme will, of course, depend on satisfactory evidence that overall value for money can be achieved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Tourism

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on each *(a)* grant and *(b)* loan made by the Northern Ireland tourist board to private sector projects for the provision of *(a)* small hotels, *(b)* guest inns, *(c)* self catering facilities and *(d)* bed-and-breakfast facilities in each year since 1993 indicating the schemes involved and the source of the tourist board's budget. [14495]

Mr. Ingram: Since 1993, the Northern Ireland tourist board has made grants to the projects listed in the tables. Small hotels have been defined as those with fewer than 20 bedrooms at the time the offer was made. During the period no loans were made. Redeemable Preference Shares of £330,000 were issued by the promoters in the case of the Manor House Hotel, Killadeas, Co. Fermanagh.

Small hotels

Project title	*Location*	*Grant (£)*	*Fund*
1993			
Manor House Hotel	Killadeas	430,000	TDS
Manor House Hotel	Killadeas	200,000	ERDF
Total		630,000	
1994			
Causeway Hotel	Giant's Causeway	150,000	TDS
Total		150,000	
1995			
Tullyglass House Hotel	Ballymena	235,000	TDS
Total		235,000	
1996			
Highways Hotel	Lame	226,301	IFI
Hotel Carlton	Belleek	160,000	IFI
Lodge Hotel	Coleraine	82,200	IFI
Bushmills Inn	Bushmills	400,000	SSPPR
Total		868,501	
1997			
Millbrook Lodge Hotel	Ballynahinch	57,000	IFI
Donard Hotel	Newcastle	68,265	IFI
Charlemont Arms Hotel	Armagh	200,00	IFI
Beech Hill County House	Londonderry	136,740	SSPPR
Total		462,005	
Grand total		2,345,506	

IFI—International Fund For Ireland.
ERDF—European Regional Development Fund.
TDS—Tourism Development Scheme.
SSPPR–Special Support Programme For Peace and Reconciliation.

Licensed guest inns

Project title	*Location*	*Grant (£)*	*Fund*
1993			
Creeve House	Randalstown	35,950	TDS
Total		35,950	
1995			
Old Schoolhouse	Comber	51,732	IFI
Moy Inn	Moy	92,000	IFI
Total		143,732	
1996			
Kelly's Inn	Ballygawley	90,000	IFI
Denvir's Inn	Downpatrick	68,085	IFI
Station Bar	Eglinton	85,238	IFI
Total		243,323	
Grand total		423,005	

IFI—International Fund For Ireland. TDS—Tourism Development Scheme.

Self-catering

Project title	*Location*	*Grant £*	*Fund*
1993			
Rathmore Cottages	Belleek	214,440	IFI
National Trust Cottages	Crom, Florencecourt	114,650	IFI
Lough Beg Mews	Bellaghy	145,000	TDS
Lecale Cottages	Rostrevor	100,000	TDS
Lusty Beg—Pleasure Cruiser	Boa Island	16,300	ERDF
Marine Hotel Apartments	Ballycastle	139,850	ERDF
Total		730,240	
1994			
Tory Bush Cottages	Kilcoo	110,800	IFI
Killyleagh Castle Apartments	Killyleagh	68,700	TDS
Maddybenny Holiday Cottages	Portrush	79,000	TDS
Total		258,500	
1995			
Fermanagh Lakeland Lodges	Kesh	48,015	IFI
Ballylinny Holiday Cottages	Bushmills	89,700	TDS
Lusty Beg Island Ph2	Boa Island	535,084	TDS
Lusty Beg Island Ph2	Boa Island	283,008	ERDF
Total		955,807	
1996			
Belle Isle Ph2	Lisbellaw	24,505	TDS
Tybann House	Cushendun	35,467	TDS
Rathmore Cottages Cruisers	Belleek	17,852	TDS
Mourne Cottages	Maghera, Co. Down	61,140	TDS
Ballygally Self-Catering Cottage	Ballygally	79,230	TDS
Belle Isle Ph3	Lisbellaw	174,600	TDS
Drumcovitt Barn Self-Catering	Feeny	25,965	TDS
O'Harabrook Self-Catering	Ballymoney	36,846	TDS
Total		455,605	
Grand total		2,400,152	

IFI—International Fund For Ireland.
ERDF—European Regional Development Fund.
TDS—Tourism Development Scheme.

B&B and guesthouse improvements

Project title	Location	Grant (£)	Fund
1993			
Hillhouse	Downpatrick	7,780	IFI
Grange Lodge	Dungannon	15,984	IFI
Riverside House	Belleek	12,723	IFI
Rockhaven	Portstewart	12,420	IFI
Mullynaval Lodge	Boa Island	27,230	IFI
Beresford House	Bangor	12,938	IFI
Brook Lodge	Lisburn	7,522	IFI
FernHill House	Warrenpoint	5,160	IFI
Trosben Villa	Cushendall	9,361	IFI
Ashton House	Newry	6,110	IFI
Robin Hill	Londonderry	15,651	IFI
Castle Erin	Portrush	66,580	IFI
Rockeden	Portadown	48,000	TDS
Colebrooke House	Brookeborough	75,500	TDS
Total		322,959	
1994			
Invershiel	Portrush	5,661	IFI
Ardtara	Maghera	115,000	TDS
Total		120,661	
1995			
The Narrows	Portaferry	168,771	IFI
Total		168,771	
1996			
Corick House	Clogher	93,000	TDS
Keef Halla	Nutts Corner	13,050	ERDF
Roseleigh House	Belfast	11,250	ERDF
Greenmount Lodge	Omagh	4,884	ERDF
Rockbank B&B	Ballynure	1,716	ERDF
Bellevue Country House	Blackhill, Coleraine	3,372	ERDF
Glendale	Cushendale	6,480	ERDF
Akaroa	Portstewart	2,340	ERDF
Abocurragh	Letterbreen	5,925	ERDF
Fullerton Arms	Ballintoy	27,108	ERDF
Oakdene	Belfast	77,640	ERDF
Glenhaven	Ballycastle	2,107	ERDF
Afton House	Omagh	3,448	ERDF
The Stables	Antrim	32,675	ERDF
Ard-Na-Tra	Portstewart	12,000	ERDF
Rua Wai Farm	Ballyclare	4,104	ERDF
Quarrytown Lodge	Broughshane	1,561	ERDF
Total		302,660	
1997			
Caldhame Lodge	Crumlin	34,087	ERDF
Greenhill House	Aghadowey	1,409	ERDF
Barnageeha	Killinchy	4,635	ERDF
Glenmore House	Ballycastle	20,164	ERDF
Loguestown Farmhouse	Portrush	6,084	ERDF
Number Ten	Newcastle	4,132	ERDF
Total		70,511	
Grand total		985,562	

IFI—International Fund For Ireland.
ERDF—European Regional Development Fund.
TDS—Tourism Development Scheme.

NITB grants made 1993–97

	1993 £	1994 £	1995 £	1996 £	1997 £
Small hotels					
TDS	430,000	150,000	235,000	0	0
ERDF	200,000	0	0	0	0
IFI	0	0	0	468,501	325,265
SSPPR	0	0	0	400,000	136,740
Total	630,000	150,000	235,000	868,501	462,005

NITB grants made 1993–97

	1993 £	1994 £	1995 £	1996 £	1997 £
Licensed guest inns					
TDS	35,950	0	0	0	0
ERDF	0	0	0	0	0
IFI	0	0	143,732	243,323	0
SSPPR	0	0	0	0	0
Total	35,950	0	143,732	243,323	0
Self-catering					
TDS	245,000	147,700	624,784	455,605	0
ERDF	156,150	0	283,008	0	0
IFI	329,090	110,800	48,015	0	0
SSPPR	0	0	0	0	0
Total	730,240	258,500	955,807	455,605	0
B and B					
TDS	123,500	115,000	0	93,000	0
ERDF	0	0	0	209,660	70,511
IFI	199,459	5,661	168,771	0	0
SSPPR	0	0	0	0	0
Total	322,959	120,661	168,771	302,660	70,511

TDS—Tourism Development Scheme. ERDF—European Regional Development Fund.
IFI—International Fund For Ireland.
SSPPR—Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

Health and Social Services Boards

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations she has received in relation to the decision not to re-appoint Ms Geraldine Donaghy to the Southern Health and Social Services Board; and if she will make a statement. [14538]

Mr. Worthington: There have been a number of representations in relation to the decision not to re-appoint Ms Donaghy to the Southern Health and Social Services Board. These include three from Members of this House—Mr. Seamus Mallon, Mr. Roger Stott and Mr. Harry Barnes, two from District Councils in Northern Ireland, the Chairperson of the Southern Health and Social Services Council, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition and 14 from other individuals and community groups.

Ms Donaghy's re-appointment has been handled in accordance with the Code of Practice and Guidelines issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. However, she remains dissatisfied with the outcome and has exercised her right of appeal to the Commissioner for Public Appointments and lodged a complaint with the Fair Employment Tribunal.

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many out-going non-executive members of each health board in Northern Ireland were *(a)* re-appointed, without undergoing formal interview, *(b)* re-appointed after undergoing formal interview, *(c)* not re-appointed and not offered a formal interview and *(d)* not re-appointed after undergoing formal interview when the existing boards were constituted. [14539]

Mr. Worthington: Of the appointments to Health and Social Service Boards which expired on 31 March 1997, the following were re-appointed without undergoing formal interview:

	Number
Northern Health and Social Service Board	Nil
Southern Health and Social Services Board	1
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	1
Western Health and Social Services Board	2

Of the appointments to Health and Social Services Boards which expired on 31 March 1997, the following were re-appointed after undergoing formal interview:

	Number
Northern Health and Social Services Board	Nil
Southern Health and Social Services Board	Nil
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	Nil
Western Health and Social Services Board	Nil

Of the appointments to Health and Social Services Boards which expired on 31 March 1997, the following were not re-appointed and not offered a formal interview.

	Number
Northern Health and Social Services Board	1
Southern Health and Social Services Board	1
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	1
Western Health and Social Services Board	Nil

Of the appointments to Health and Social Services Boards which expired on 31 March 1997, the following were not re-appointed after undergoing a formal interview:

	Number
Northern Health and Social Services Board	1
Southern Health and Social Services Board	1
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	Nil
Western Health and Social Services Board	Nil

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the procedures and criteria employed by the Department of Health and Social Services for the recruitment of non-executive directors of each health and social services board in Northern Ireland. [14540]

Mr. Worthington: Appointments to Health and Social Services Boards in Northern Ireland are made by the Department of Health and Social Services, subject to the approval of the Minister. When an initial term of office expires, there is no automatic right to re-appointment.

Non-executive members are not appointed as representatives of any specific group or organisation but in a personal capacity for the skills and experience they can bring to the Board. These may include relevant professional skills, management skills gained in the public, private or voluntary sectors or an ability to bring a user perspective to the Board.

The DHSS Appointment Procedures are governed by the Code of Practice and Guidelines issued by the Commissioner for Public Appointments who monitors, regulates and approves their application. The main elements of the Procedures are:-

advertising of appointment opportunities;

job descriptions and person specifications for all posts;

a formal and open selection process based on merit;

an independent member of all interview panels; and

a formal complaints procedure.

Mr. Mallon: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many non-executive directors of each health board in Northern Ireland had completed their first period of office by 31 March; and how many of these indicated their willingness to serve a further term of office. [14541]

Mr. Worthington: The non-executive directors of Health and Social Services Boards who *(a)* completed their first period of office on 31 March 1997 and *(b)* indicated their willingness to serve a further term of office were as follows:

	(a) *Number*	*(b)* *Number*
Northern Health and Social Services Board	1	1
Southern Health and Social Services Board	2	2
Eastern Health and Social Services Board	Nil	Nil
Western Health and Social Services Board	1	1

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Micro-credit Agencies

11. **Mr. Tipping:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to further the development of micro-credit agencies. [14118]

Mr. Foulkes: My Department is recognised as one of the leading bilateral donors in microfinance, which provides particular benefits to poorer people. We plan to continue to increase the level of our support, beyond the £75 million already committed.

Bilateral Debt

12. **Mr. Martlew:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has made to write off the bilateral debt of the poorest countries. [14119]

Clare Short: The British Government have already written off £1.2 billion of all aid debt. On 15 September, I announced a new programme to cancel the aid debts of lower income Commonwealth countries which are committed to the internationally agreed development targets, to good government, to rooting out corruption, and applying economic policies which benefit the poor. Offers have already been made to seven countries and discussions have started with others.

Montserrat

13. **Mr. Rhodri Morgan:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her current assessment of the future habitability of Montserrat. [14120]

Mr. Foulkes: I discussed with the Chief Scientist today the latest scientific advice. This raises further concerns about the safety of the north of the island, which will need to be assessed urgently.

Know-how Fund

14. **Mr. Sayeed:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the future of the know-how fund. [14121]

Mr. Foulkes: My Department will continue to support the countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union through the know-how Fund. We shall seek particularly to ensure that the benefits of transition are sustainable and the needs of the poorest are properly protected.

16. **Mr. Llwyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance had been offered to Belarus and the Ukraine from the know-how fund during the last year; and if she will make a statement. [14123]

Clare Short: In 1996–97 the know-how fund provided around £800,000 in technical assistance for Belarus and around £9 million for Ukraine. We are concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus and the growth of poverty in the countries of the former Soviet Union and are adjusting our programmes accordingly.

Human Rights

15. **Mr. McAllion:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what discussions she has had with other countries relating to the linking of international aid to records of human rights. [14122]

Clare Short: In all my meetings I make it clear that our Government are committed to a rights-based approach to human development. My Department's particular concern is for the rights of the poor to make their voices heard and to secure the social and economic rights laid down in the universal declaration of human rights. All our work is devoted to this end.

UNESCO

17. **Mr. Sheerman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to develop a partnership between UNESCO and British parliamentarians. [14124]

Clare Short: I am keen to encourage as broad a UK relationship as possible with UNESCO. I would be delighted to pursue any ideas my hon. Friend might have for strengthening parliamentary links with the Organisation.

Bananas

18. **Mr. Soley**: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support her Department will give to small farmers in the Caribbean currently dependent on the banana crop. [14125]

Mr. Foulkes: Current UK assistance (97–98, £6 million) aims to strengthen the infrastructural and policy framework within which new initiatives can flourish and to raise educational standards so that people can take advantage of new opportunities. This complements substantial EC resources designed to promote efficiency in the banana industry, agricultural and economic diversification.

22. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to challenge the World Trade Organisation judgment concerning Caribbean banana producers. [14129]

Mr. Foulkes: The present EU bananas regime represents a serious attempt to meet our obligations to developing countries, in particular the African, Pacific and Caribbean (ACP) countries. It is disappointing that some parts of the regime have now been found incompatible with World Trade Organisation (WTO) rules. The UK supported the EU in its appeal against the ruling of the Dispute Settlement Panel but the WTO Appellate Body upheld most of the Panel findings. There are no further avenues of appeal left open to the EU. As firm adherents of the WTO process, we naturally accept therefore that the Community's arrangements will need to be brought into conformity with the WTO's rules.

The Government are considering the WTO findings on the EU banana regime in liaison with the Commission in Brussels, who have the principal responsibility for proposing revised arrangements which conform to our WTO obligations. As leading advocates of the legitimate interests of those developing countries in the Caribbean who have traditionally supplied the UK market, we intend to play a major role in developing a solution to the problem and are examining a number of proposals. Caribbean banana producers can rest assured that we have their interest high in our agenda.

Development Assistance Committee

19. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development who represented the UK Government at the DAC Expert Group on Women in Development held in Paris on the 2 and 3 October; and if she will make a statement on the meeting. [14126]

Clare Short: The UK Government was representated by a Senior Social Development Adviser from my Department.

During the last 15 years the Group has played a catalytic role in ensuring that development agencies address the rights and needs of women. In the preparations for the Beijing Conference the UK served as Chair to the Group and is currently a member of the Bureau (Steering Group).

At its most recent meeting the Group changed its title to *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Cooperation*. The Group's future workplan was agreed. Major items include integrating gender into the DAC's work on poverty eradication, ensuring that gender equality is handled as a cross-cutting issue in all the development Targets and presenting Guidelines on Gender Equality for endorsement by the DAC.

World Bank Report

20. **Mr. Prior:** What the Secretary of State for International Development what response her Department has made to the World Bank's World Development report 1997: the State in a Changing World. [14127]

Clare Short: In discussion with the President of the World Bank, I welcomed this report and, in particular, its recognition of the enabling role of the state in promoting pro-poor growth and providing services for poor people. My Department also participated in, and part-financed, a meeting of the European Policy Forum which brought together European donors, academics and the World Bank to assess the report's main messages. My officials have also discussed the report with the World Bank with a view to assessing the relevance of its conclusions for our own work.

Iran (Refugees)

21. **Mr. Cousins:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will estimate the numbers of refugees in Iran; and what action she is taking, with our European partners, to provide assistance to them. [14128]

Clare Short: According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) there are approximately 2,016,000 refugees in Iran, including:

1.4 M from Afghanistan;

580,000 from Iraq;

36,000 others (of which the main groups are from Zaire, Rwanda, Angola, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Tajikstan, and Azerbaijan).

The European Community Humanitarian Office have given over £28 million during the period 1992–1996 of which the UK share is approximately £4.7 million. It's programmes are regularly discussed among EU partners.

Tibet

23. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to provide assistance to the peoples and environment of Tibet. [14130]

Clare Short: We are currently contributing some £680,000 to five projects which are being implemented by non-governmental organisations. These projects—in the fields of education, income generation and environmental health—are helping to address the needs of rural and urban communities within Tibet and of Tibetan refugees in India.

Indonesian Rain Forests

24. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's work in relation to Indonesian tropical rain forests. [14131]

Clare Short: Forests provide vital resources for poor communities in Indonesia. Since 1991, my Department has spent over £25 million supporting efforts in Indonesia to conserve and enhance those resources through sustainable forest management. We are now preparing a new programme that will focus on increasing the benefits that poor forest dwellers get from their forests. This will improve the lives of the needy and encourage better protection against destructive forest clearing, logging and fires.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

25. **Mr. Day:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will link aid to the entities in Bosnia-Herzegovina to progress in the implementation of the Dayton Agreement. [14132]

Clare Short: Yes. Britain and other Governments seek to ensure that aid not only brings practical benefits but encourages Bosnian compliance with Dayton.

Aid Target

26. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to meet the UN target of 0.7 per cent. of gross domestic product for overseas aid. [14133]

Clare Short: As our Manifesto and the Government's White Paper on International Development makes clear, we are committed to the UN 0.7 per cent. oda/GNP target and to reversing the decline in UK aid spending of the past 18 years which was cut from 0.51 per cent. of GNP to 0.27 per cent. under the previous administration.

Slavery

27. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what international initiatives she is supporting to combat slavery. [14134]

Clare Short: The United Kingdom has strengthened its commitment to the work of the International Labour Office (ILO) to strengthen the implementation of international conventions covering slavery and bonded labour especially where it affects children. I attended the International Conference of Child Labour in Oslo last month and was able to give strong support for the work of both ILO and United Nations Children's Fund in combating bonded child labour.

In Britain we are providing support for projects including Anti-Slavery International among others.

Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency

28. **Mr. Wells:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the 1997 annual report of the World Bank's Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency. [14135]

Clare Short: I am pleased that MIGA's 1997 Annual Report shows continuing growth in demand for insurance cover for private investments in developing countries. At the meeting of the Development Committee of the Bank in Hong Kong in September, I joined fellow Governors in agreeing a solution to MIGA's capital constraint, which will enable it to continue to expand its guarantee business.

Small and Medium Businesses

29. **Mrs. Browning:** To ask the Secretary of Stae for International Development what steps her Department is taking to encourage small and medium businesses in developing countries. [14136]

Clare Short: My Department is actively supporting the development of micro, small and medium enterprises. They are an essential means of providing poor people with greater access to income and employment opportunities.

The budgetary commitment to current projects exceeds £100 million. This is expected to continue to increase, notably in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa and South Asia.

DFID's support takes three forms: improving the policy and regulatory environment, creating or strengthening local financial institutions, e.g. leasing companies or microfinance institutions and supporting local organisations providing cost effective business development services, e.g. skills training, market access.

Belarus

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department is providing to the children of Belarus suffering from the after-effects of the Chernobyl disaster; and if she will make a statement. [15087]

Clare Short: The UK's Environmental Know How Fund has previously assisted post-Chernobyl programmes, including food screening for radioactive contamination. We are not presently providing direct assistance to Chernobyl victims in Belarus. We contribute through the EU and to international organisations such as the World Health Organisation who are supporting Chernobyl victims.

Investment

Mr. Love: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what are her Department's plans for encouraging ethical and socially responsible investment in developing countries. [14116]

Clare Short: I am very keen to encourage and reinforce the fair trade and ethical investment consumer movements in every way possible. My department has numerous and growing contacts with groups interested in fair trade and ethical investment in developing countries. The potential of these movements to improve labour standards and environmental protection for large numbers of people in developing countries is considerable. We are assisting British Companies and NGOs to work together towards these goals.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Press Releases

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many press releases have been issued by her Department since May 1997; and how many press releases have been released under the heading "Minister for Women" since May 1997. [14064]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

	Total number of press releases	*Minister for Women press releases only*
DSS Headquarters	178	24
Benefits Agency	22	0
Child Support Agency	8	0
Information Technology Services Agency	2[1]	0
Contributions Agency	16	0
War Pension Agency	0	0
Total	224	24

1. Issued on behalf of ITSA by DSS Headquarters and is included in the total for DSS HQ.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will place in the Library lists of those individuals and organisations to whom Departmental press releases are sent *(a)* by post, *(b)* by fax and *(c)* by electronic mail. [14065]

Mr. Field: The information has been placed in the Library.

Pensions

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is the policy of Her Majesty's Government that the state pension alone should provide pensioners with an adequate income. [14571]

Mr. Denham: The key objective of our review of pensions is to ensure that pensioners should have an adequate income in retirement; that they should share fairly in rising national prosperity and that public finances should be both sustainable and affordable. For most people, security in retirement will come from a combination of the basic State Pension and a second pension. One of the fundamental challenges of the review is to agree where the responsibility for funding pensions should lie and to establish the right balance between the public and private sectors.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to address the effects of changing jobs and taking breaks on women's pension arrangements. [14572]

Mr. Denham: A wide-ranging review of pensions was announced on 17 July. One of the Government's fundamental challenges in pensions is to narrow the pensions gap between men and women so as to give women more security in retirement. Many private pensions are simply not flexible enough to cope with working patterns of women. Women still earn less on average than men and are more likely to have caring responsibilities.

The Government recognise that carers—many of whom are women—who cannot contribute to second pensions because of caring responsibilities, make a valuable contribution to society but lack the opportunity to provide for their own future. That is why the Government are looking at ways to develop the administrative structure of SERPS so as to provide a citizenship pension for those who care for others.

We are also committed to developing secure, flexible and value for money stakeholder pensions. These will be aimed at those on modest incomes, working part time or with intermittent work patterns, who often do not have

the opportunity to join a good occupational pension scheme, or for whom a personal pension is unsuitable. Stakeholder pensions should therefore be of particular help to women. The Government's National Childcare Strategy will also provide greater opportunities for women to participate in the wider economy so that they are able to contribute to their own pensions.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will ensure that the pensions structure takes account of the effects of divorce. [14573]

Mr. Denham: We are modernising the welfare state to take account of social changes, such as a higher divorce rate, and to enable pensioners to have an adequate income in retirement. As a step towards this the Government is committed to introducing pension sharing for divorcing couples. We aim to do so from April 2000.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans she has to provide unbiased, accessible and affordable professional advice for those planning their pensions. [14574]

Mr. Denham: Improving education and awareness of pensions is a key focus of the Pensions Review process. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 23 July the setting up of a Pensions Education Working Group to consider how pensions education and awareness issues might be co-ordinated, well targeted and effective. The Group has also been asked to advise the Secretary of State by the end of January 1998 what other actions are needed to improve knowledge of pensions.

The Department is reviewing the provision of pensions literature to reflect the Government's wish to empower ordinary people by giving them the information they need to make the right decisions about their pension provision, whatever it might be, now and in the future.

Heating or Eating Appeal

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans the Government have to contribute to the Heating or Eating Appeal organised by Help the Aged. [15653]

Mr. Denham: We welcome and support the work of charities in complementing the welfare provision the Government make to vulnerable members of society. The Government are already tackling the problems associated with vulnerable people keeping warm during cold weather. We have already taken action to cut fuel costs and make homes easier to heat. We are committed to examining the means of delivering more automatic help to the poorest pensioners.

Social Fund Cold Weather Payments of £8.50 will again be issued automatically to those pensioners in receipt of Income Support, when the average temperature in their area is recorded as, or forecast to be 0°C or below, over seven consecutive days. Last winter, the Cold Weather Payments scheme triggered a total of 125 times, involving 55 of the 70 Meteorological Office weather stations used. Almost five million payments worth over £42 million were issued to an estimated 2.7 million people.

HEALTH

Myodil

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons his Department has decided not to proscribe the use of Myodil in myelography. [14603]

Ms Jowell: Myodil was voluntarily withdrawn from the market for commercial reasons by the manufacturers in 1987. The product licence for Myodil expired on 2 June 1992 and was not renewed. Myodil is therefore no longer licensed.

Adhesive Arachnoiditis

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to institute an inquiry into adhesive arachnoiditis, with special reference to the alleged failure of several doctors to disclose to patients suffering from the condition that they have contracted it; and if he will make a statement. [14607]

Ms Jowell: We have no plans to institute an inquiry into this issue. The Department has no knowledge of the alleged failure of disclosure by doctors.

Hospital Beds

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has given to health authorities on the assumptions to be used when calculating hospital bed occupancy rates. [15467]

Mr. Boateng: The Department of Health collects information on bed occupancy from National Health Service trusts. Guidance on completion of these central returns is included in the NHS Data Manual, copies of which are available in the Library.

An occupied bed day is defined as "one which is occupied at midnight on the day in question". Occupancy rates are calculated by dividing the number of occupied bed days by the number of available bed days.

For beds in wards only open during the day, an occupied bed day is one in which at least one day case has taken place during the day.

Nursing Homes

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department's plans for all inspection reports for nursing homes to be made available to the public will include reports of inspections that have already been carried out. [15182]

Mr. Boateng: No. From 1 April 1998 all nursing home inspection reports carried out after that date will be available to the public. In some areas inspection reports are already made available to the public with the agreement of nursing home proprietors. We will consider what further action might be taken within the existing legal framework to allow access to past reports.

Waiting Lists (South-West)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list by health authority in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon, the number of people on

NHS waiting lists for (i) 0–11 months, (ii) 12–18 months and (iii) more than 18 months for (1) each year and (2) each quarter since 1992; [15528]

(2) if he will list for the South and West Region the number of people on NHS waiting lists for *(a)* 0–11 months, *(b)* 12–18 months and *(c)* more than 18 months for (i) each year and (ii) each quarter since 1992. [15527]

Mr. Milburn: Health authority based waiting list information is contained in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England (Resident Based)". The first published information shows the position on 30 June 1996. Provider based information, which has been available since prior to 1992 and from which regional figures can be obtained, is contained in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England". Both these publications are produced on a quarterly basis and copies are available in the Library.

NHS Spending Targets

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the distance from spending target of each NHS trust in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon in each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [15472]

(2) if he will list the deficits of *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* national health service trusts in (i) Devon and (ii) Cornwall in each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [15388]

Mr. Milburn: Details of the income and expenditure deficits of *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* National Health Service trusts in (i) Devon and (ii) Cornwall since 1991–92 are given in the table. Figures for earlier years will be placed in the Library shortly. The distance from spending target in NHS trusts has been interpreted as the income and expenditure position since NHS trusts are not set spending targets as such but receive income through contracts for healthcare provision to cover their expenditure.

		£
(a) i. Health authority deficits in Devon		
1991–92	Exeter HA	67,000
	North Devon HA	65,000
	Torbay HA	449,000
1992–93	Exeter HA	439,000
	North Devon HA	546,000
	Plymouth HA	1,963,000
1993–94	North and East Devon	330,000
	South and West Devon	1,198,000
1994–95	None	—
1995–96	North and East Devon	1,728,000
	South and West Devon	4,068,000
1996–97	North and East Devon	3,708,000
	South and West Devon	5,558,000
(a) ii. Health authority deficits in Cornwall		
1991–92	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	35,000
1993–94	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	2,491,000
1995–96	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	225,000
1996–97	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	3,151,000

The 1996–97 health authority figures are for merged health authorities (previously separate district health authorities and family health service authorities).

Changes in accounting policies mean that not all years accounts are prepared on a comparable basis.

		£
(b) i. Trust deficits in Devon		
1991–92	None	—
1992–93	Devon Ambulance	141,000
1993–94	None	—
1994–95	None	—
1995–96	Plymouth Hospitals	426,000
	Plymouth Community	49,000
	Royal Devon and Exeter	454,000
	South Devon Healthcare	821,000
1996–97	Plymouth Community	85,000
	Royal Devon and Exeter	532,000
	South Devon Healthcare	1,395,000
(b) ii. Trust deficits in Cornwall		
1991–91	None	—
1992–93	Trecare	186,000
1993–94	None	—
1994–95	None	—
1995–96	Royal Cornwall Hospitals	485,000
	Trecare	1,055,000
1996–97	Trecare	29,000

Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Learning Disabilities NHS Trust changed its name to Trecare NHS Trust in 1995.

Deficits (Health Authorities and Trusts)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the average total underspend in English national health service trusts in each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [15384]

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the average deficit of *(a)* health authorities and *(b)* national health service trusts in England in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; [15387]

(2) if he will list the average distance from spending target of NHS trusts in England in each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [15471]

Mr. Milburn: Details of the total and average income and expenditure surpluses/deficits for health authorities and National Health Service trusts in England since 1991–92 are given in the table. Figures for earlier years will be placed in the Library shortly.

The distance from spending target and underspend in NHS trusts have been interpreted as the income and expenditure position since NHS trusts are not set spending targets as such but receive income through contracts for healthcare provision to cover their expenditure.

£ million

Year	*Total surplus/(deficit)*	*Average surplus/(deficit)*
Health authorities		
1991–92	174.7	0.9
1992–93	76.4	0.4
1993–94	48.9	0.3
1994–95	(53.5)	(0.4)
1995–96	(202.4)	(1.8)
1996–97	(238.2)	(2.4)
Trusts		
1991–92	46.1	0.8
1992–93	88.4	0.6

£ million

Year	Total surplus/(deficit)	Average surplus/(deficit)
1993–94	185.6	0.6
1994–95	178.7	0.4
1995–96	46.1	0.1
1996–97	(50.5)	(0.1)

The 1996–97 health authority figure is for merged health authorities (previously separate district health authorities and family health service authorities).

Changes in accounting policies mean that not all years accounts are prepared on a comparable basis.

Community Hospitals

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list by health authority the number of community hospitals in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; [15529]

(2) what was the average number of community hospitals per health authority in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; [15530]

(3) how many community hospitals there were in England in each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [15531]

Mr. Boateng: Information about the number of community hospitals in England is not collected in central returns. However the Department of Health is providing a grant to the Community Hospitals Association to update its directory of community hospitals.

Information available from the three health authorities in Devon and Cornwall shows that the total number of community hospitals in each health authority in 1997 is as follows:

Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority: 17

North and East Devon Health Authority: 21

South and West Devon Health Authority: 12

Information on earlier years is not readily available.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what was the total spending on community hospitals in England in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; [15468]

(2) what was the average health authority spending on community hospitals in England in each year since 1979 for which figures are available *(a)* per hospital and *(b)* per health authority; [15469]

(3) if he will list by health authority the spending on community hospitals in *(a)* Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and *(b)* the three health authorities in Devon in (i) cash terms, (ii) per capita and (iii) 1979 prices in each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [15470]

Mr. Milburn: Financial information is collected on the basis of National Health Service trusts. Information is not therefore available about individual hospitals. Health authorities commission community health services from a wide variety of NHS trusts. Central information about this cannot be disaggregated by NHS trust or individual hospital.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list by health authority the number of beds in community hospitals in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; [15526]

(2) if he will list the *(a)* total and *(b)* average number of beds in community hospitals in England in each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [15525]

Mr. Boateng: Information on hospital beds is published annually in "Bed Availability for England" copies of which are available in the Library. The information is for National Health Service trusts and is collected by ward type. It is not possible to disaggregate information about community hospitals from the wider NHS trusts information.

Information available from the three health authorities in Devon and Cornwall shows the total number of community hospital beds in each health authority in 1997 is as follows:

Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority: 467

North and East Devon Health Authority: 532

South and West Devon Health Authority: 344

Information on earlier years is not readily available.

GP Fundholders (South-West)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list by health authority in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon the total underspend by GP fundholders in each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [15383]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is in the table. These figures are the total savings on general practitioner fundholders' budgets, and savings per fundholding practice. The figures for 1996–97 are provisional.

General practitioner fundholding accounts
(all figures are in £000)

Year	Authority	Total underspend	FH practices	Savings per practice
Cornwall				
1992–93	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly FHSA	452	4	113
1993–94	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly FHSA	387	8	48
1994–95	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly FHSA	720	11	65
1995–96	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly HA	985	11	90
1996–97	Cornwall and Isles of Scilly HA	971	18	54
Devon				
1992–93	Devon FHSA	556	16	35
1993–94	Devon FHSA	1,285	26	49
1994–95	Devon FHSA	2,037	29	70
1995–96	Devon FHSA	1,530	33	46
1996–97	North and East Devon HA	1,706	33	52
	South and West Devon HA	1,259	33	38

Source:
Annual accounts of the family health services authorities (1992–93).
GP fundholder audited accounts (1993–94 to 1995–96).
Annual accounts of health authorities (1996–97).
Note:
1996–97 figures are provisional.

Cold Weather (Elderly People)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will commission research into the effects of cold weather on the health of the elderly. [15639]

Mr. Boateng: There are currently no plans to commission any such research. It is known that mortality rises steeply in winter and that the increase in deaths is chiefly among people 60 or older. The Department, in partnership with the Benefits Agency and the voluntary sector, runs an annual campaign—Keep Warm, Keep Well—which aims to provide information on health, benefits and home improvement during the winter.

Community Nurses

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list the spending on community nurses in each health authority in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon in each year since 1979 for which figures are available; [15659]

(2) if he will list the average spending on community nurses for English health authorities in each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [15660]

(3) if he will list the spending on community nurses in England *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* at 1979 prices for each year since 1979 for which figures are available. [15661]

Mr. Milburn: Information on spending on community health nursing can not be separated centrally from expenditure on all nursing staff. The table shows expenditure on community nursing services of which community nursing staff will form the major part. The information is not available for individual health authorities.

Community nursing services

£ million

Year	*Cash figures*	*1979 prices*
1979–80	240.0	240.0
1980–81	328.9	278.0
1981–82	371.9	286.5
1982–83	407.9	293.5
1983–84	432.4	297.2
1984–85	474.2	310.3

Community nursing services

£ million

Year	*Cash figures*	*1979 prices*
1985–86	517.4	321.2
1986–87	581.9	350.5
1987–88	693.7	396.9
1988–89[1]	824.6	442.1
1988–89[1]	1,035.8	555.4
1989–90	1,153.2	578.1
1990–91	1,289.5	598.4
1991–92	1,601.3	698.6
1992–93	1,684.9	705.3
1993–94	1,877.5	763.8
1994–95	1,909.1	765.2
1995–96	2,053.1	800.7

[1] The categories for which community services data were collected changed in 1998–89 as follows:
1979–80 to 1988–89 Health Visiting, District Nursing, Community Midwifery; 1989–90 to 1995–96 Professional Advice and Support, General Patient Care, Community Mental Illness Nursing, Community Mental Health Nursing, Community Maternity.
Figures are presented on both bases for 1988–89.
1. The GDP factor was used to calculate the 1979–80 prices.
2. Figures for 1991–92 onwards cannot be compared with those for earlier years due to changes in accounting practices following the NHS reforms.

Delayed Discharges

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list by National Health Service trust in *(a)* Cornwall and *(b)* Devon the number of delayed discharges in each year since 1992 for which figures are available; [15385]

(2) what was the average number of delayed discharges in English National Health Service trusts in each year since 1992 for which figures are available. [15386]

Mr. Boateng: Information on delayed discharge is collected by the Department of Health on a health authority basis and not by National Health Service trust. The available information is in the table. The information is collected on a survey basis and shows the number of patients aged 75 and over, who are ready for discharge, but still occupy a hospital bed on a given day in the quarter. It is not the total number of delayed discharges in that quarter.

Patients aged 75 and over ready for discharge but still occupying a hospital bed

	Q4 1994–95	*Q2 1995–96*	*Q4 1995–96*	*Q1 1996–97*	*Q3 1996–97*	*Q4 1996–97*	*Q1 1997–98*
South and West Devon	0	48	111	116	22	37	57
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	92	96	84	51	65	73	43
North and East Devon	140	90	129	165	165	165	66
Average per health authority in England	65	71	77	79	65	71	64

Health Services (Rural Areas)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has given to health authorities on the accessibility of acute and community hospital services in remote rural areas. [15466]

Mr. Boateng: We have not issued any detailed guidance on models of health care in remote rural communities. However, we are currently reviewing issues relating to effective service configurations, including access to services for patients.

It is the responsibility of individual health authorities to determine the most appropriate balance of health services for their populations, and they are accountable to the National Health Service Executive for doing so.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 13 November 1997

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Director-General of Water Services

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will ensure that independent reporters used by the Director General of Water Services in his 1999 Review to challenge the cost and investment estimates of the water companies have no contractual arrangements with the water companies on which they are reporting. [14491]

Angela Eagle: The arrangements for reporters used by the Director General of Water Services in carrying out his statutory duties are a matter for him.

The Director has consulted widely on the arrangements for reporters, firstly in his open letter ("MD126") issued on 20 March 1997 and more recently in his consultation paper about the business planning process for the 1999 Periodic Review. Both documents are in the Library. He has asked for comments on his proposals by Friday 14 November.

Household Evictions

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many household evictions from *(a)* local authority and *(b)* housing association properties involved (i) children and (ii) one or more children who were statemented as having special needs in each of the last three years; [14821]

(2) how many households were evicted from *(a)* local authority and *(b)* housing association properties in each of the last three years; [14823]

(3) how many household evictions for *(a)* local authority and *(b)* housing association properties, were as a consequence of (i) rent arrears, (ii) anti-social behaviour, (iii) criminal activities and (iv) other causes in each of the last three years; [14820]

(4) how many households were accepted for re-housing under the terms of the Children Act 1989 in each of the last three years; and how many such acceptances followed evictions from *(a)* local authority, *(b)* housing association and *(c)* private rented accommodation. [14817]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Town and Country Planning

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations his Department has received about the *(a)* Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 and *(b)* Town and Country Planning (Demolition-Description of Buildings) Direction 1995. [15157]

Mr. Raynsford: We have received representations seeking amendments to both the General Permitted Development Order and the Demolition Direction so that a planning application can in future be required to demolish various types of sports facilities. The Government are concerned to prevent the unnecessary loss of sports facilities, particularly where there are no clear proposals for redevelopment, and we will review the need for amendments to the relevant legislation once the courts have reached their decision on Robert Coppen and others *v.* Edward Ram and another, 20 January 1997.

A449

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to improve the safety of the A449 between Worcester and Kidderminster. [15603]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Lawrie Haynes to Mr. Peter Luff, dated 13 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked me to reply to your recent question about plans to improve the safety of the A449 between Worcester and Kidderminster.

The Highways Agency is very concerned about the continuing accident problem on this section of the A449. Earlier this year we commissioned our agents, Hereford and Worcester County Council, to undertake a study to identify ways in which we could prevent specific types of accident and improve safety generally.

Their report should be available before the end of the year. As soon as the report is available, I will write to you again to inform you of its recommendations, our response to them and the next steps.

Right-to-roam Legislation

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how often and on what dates he has met representatives of a *(a)* the Countryside Commission, *(b)* English Nature, *(c)* English Heritage, *(d)* the Ramblers Association, *(e)* the Country Landowners Association and *(f)* the National Farmers Union when the Government's proposals on right-to-roam legislation were discussed. [15324]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not had any meetings with these organisations to discuss the Government's proposals on right-to-roam legislation. My hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment discussed the Government's proposals with the Countryside Commission on 9 July and 30 October, with the Ramblers Association on 23 June and 12 September, and with the Country Landowners Association on 14 July. He and I discussed the proposals with the National Farmers Union on 22 July.

Climate Change

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on the impact of climate

change on *(a)* natural habitats and wildlife, *(b)* water resources and water management and *(c)* coastal and estuarial flooding and erosion; and if he will make a statement. [15591]

Angela Eagle: From time to time the Government receive representations on the impacts of climate change on a wide range of sectors.

The Government are concerned to understand better the potential impacts of climate change on all sectors. In this regard, they draw on the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and their own Climate Change Impacts Review Group. My Department has also established an office at the Environmental Change Unit at the University of Oxford to co-ordinate research on the impacts of climate change in the UK.

The Government are playing a key role in working for a successful international agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions at the forthcoming negotiations on climate change in Kyoto.

Pedestrian Fatalities

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* child and *(b)* total pedestrian fatalities there were in the United Kingdom and in each EU member state in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [15652]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is shown in the following table. It shows the improvement in child pedestrian fatalities in 1995 in the United Kingdom relative to other EU Member States. In 1995 the rate of child pedestrian fatalities per 100,000 population in United Kingdom was similar to that for all EU Member States.

	All child pedestrians aged 0–14 killed					*All pedestrians killed*				
Country	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*
Great Britain	210	170	153	147	120	1,496	1,347	1,241	1,124	1,038
United Kingdom	221	177	161	162	129	1,541	1,394	1,283	1,169	1,085
Austria	18	19	20	18	19	260	240	202	225	200
Belgium	31	39	14	21	—	280	233	199	197	—
Denmark	17	8	8	6	11	141	111	133	94	118
Finland	4	16	7	9	8	130	116	86	87	72
France	164	132	108	109	96	1,446	1,270	1,195	1,190	1,086
Germany	185	154	132	138	138	1,918	1,767	1,580	1,469	1,336
Greece	28	30	28	36	23	461	452	485	467	469
Ireland	23	17	17	15	—	114	115	136	121	—
Italy	82	60	47	69	—	1,241	1,148	997	1,024	—
Netherlands	26	21	16	15	24	67	56	48	41	46
Norway	10	3	9	8	5	144	152	146	123	142
Portugal	120	87	88	59	67	797	694	699	564	598
Spain	105	74	93	72	77	1,371	1,208	1,104	1,008	1,000
Sweden	7	14	6	13	6	125	138	94	86	71

Cycling

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he is making available for the promotion and improvement of cycling facilities *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in Staffordshire and *(c)* in Stoke-on-Trent. [15643]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In the current financial year a sum of £4 million has been allocated to the London Cycling Network; £79 million has also been allocated to local authorities outside London in 1997–98 for their integrated transport packages. Virtually all the packages include measures to promote cycling, but it is not possible to say how much local authorities will spend on cycling-related matters from their package allocations.

A total of £800,000 has been allocated to the North Staffordshire package in 1997–98. Staffordshire County Council has received £124,000 of this total and the City of Stoke-on-Trent £676,000.

The Department will continue to support these initiatives in future, as far as resources allow. It is not possible at this stage to predict the levels of funding that will be available in 1998–99 or in later years.

Orange Badge Scheme

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will introduce orange badge parking permits for people temporarily disabled by accidents or operations. [15858]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have no plans to do so.

Mercury

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his letter of 8 October (MR/PSO/10894/97), what action is being taken in response to the call from Arctic countries for new international controls on mercury; and what progress is being made on a protocol concerning Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution. [14469]

Angela Eagle: There are already a range of measures in place to reduce emissions of mercury in the UK. Because of these and the fact that wider international action is required to deal with the problem, no specific UK response to the call from the Arctic countries is envisaged. The UK is, however, actively participating in the negotiations to develop a protocol under the UNECE's Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution

to reduce European emissions of mercury and other heavy metals. Negotiations are at an advanced stage. It is expected that the protocol will be opened for signing at the Fourth Pan-European Conference of Environment Ministers on "Environment for Europe" in Aarhus, Denmark from 23 to 25 June 1998.

Regions White Paper

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the White Paper on the Regions. [15830]

Mr. Caborn: We are aiming to publish a White Paper on the English Regions within the next few weeks.

Household Growth

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he is pursuing to reduce growth in the number of households in England and Wales. [15768]

Mr. Raynsford: Household growth reflects demographic factors, changes in age structure and deep-seated social trends. There is therefore little scope for the Government to influence the numbers even if they believed it was appropriate to do so.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received contesting his Department's projections for household growth set out in Command Paper 2901. [15770]

Mr. Raynsford: Command 2901, the last Administration's Housing White Paper, did not contain household projections. I assume that the question refers to my Department's document "Projections of Households in England to 2016", published in 1995. I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to his hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) on 3 November, *Official Report*, column *56*.

Zoos

Mr. Etherington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to update the British zoo licensing system; and if he will make a statement. [16049]

Angela Eagle: British zoos have a deservedly high reputation for their progressive approach; the way in which their animals are kept and cared for; and the contribution they make to the conservation of endangered species through scientific research and captive breeding programmes. They have also played an important part in increasing public awareness of, and interest in, species conservation issues. It is now more than 10 years since the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 came into operation, and we believe it is time to update the system to reflect the changes in the role management of zoos which have taken place during this time, and to ensure that consistently high standards are maintained in all British zoos.

We have therefore undertaken a review of the Act. Having considered the views of a wide range of organisations concerned with zoos, we have concluded that the system is fundamentally sound and generally working well. However, we believe that there are some areas in which improvements can be made.

We propose to make a number of changes to modernise the system. The main elements are:

- a review of the Secretary of State's standards of modern zoo practice, with a view to encouraging greater efforts by zoos to promote conservation;
- closer monitoring of local authorities' performance and strengthened advice from central government to local councils and zoo operators;
- the establishment of a broadly-based Zoos Forum to oversee the zoo licensing system and advise Ministers. We propose that the Forum should comprise representatives of local authorities, voluntary bodies, and independent animal welfare and public safety experts;
- more flexible zoo inspection teams (though we believe that the requirement for teams to include a veterinary expert and one other inspector appointed by the Secretary of State should remain, and there would be no change to the frequency of inspections);
- tightening the inspection arrangements by encouraging local authorities to use their existing powers to undertake informal, unannounced inspections at least annually,
- supporting measures to improve the zoo standards throughout the European Community.

This is balanced package which will improve the level and consistency of standards throughout British zoos, strengthen their role in wildlife conservation, and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy. They will enable us to make a system which is already good even better, and by promoting greater openness and wider consultation, should help to increase public confidence in the zoo licensing system as a whole.

We now want to seek the views of those directly involved with or interested in zoos before finalising our package of improvements, and we have today issued a consultation paper setting out our proposals in more detail.

I would hope that all those with a concern for standards in our zoos will feel able to contribute, and we will certainly consider carefully all comments and proposals which we receive.

Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the House of Commons and House of Lords libraries.

Highway Code

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to consult appropriate organisations on the text of the draft revision of the Highway Code. [16170]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have today in accordance with section 38(3) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 sent copies of the draft revision of the Highway Code for consultation to representative organisations, requesting responses by 31 January 1988. We shall welcome constructive comments on the style and the content of the draft. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

New Housing

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has set targets for the proportion of new housing to be built on brown land within existing conurbations and settlements; and if he will make a statement. [15769]

Mr. Raynsford: The current target for England is for 50 per cent. of new housing to be built on previously used sites, most of which will be in existing settlements.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

E-mail

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the President of the Council pursuant to the answer of 10 November from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, *Official Report*, column *441*, if she will list the e-mail addresses of herself and her senior officials. [15870]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: The Director of the Central Drugs Co-ordination Unit is able to receive e-mail at the following address: cdcu@gtnet.gov.uk. No other of my officials has an external e-mail facility, nor do I have one myself.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Environmental Audit Committee

Mr. Stunell: To ask the President of the Council when she plans to move to establish an Environmental Audit Committee; and if she will make a statement. [15565]

Mrs. Ann Taylor: I am pleased to inform the hon. Gentleman that this was moved on Monday 10 November.

In addition the Members were announced yesterday.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Chairman of the Information Committee pursuant to the answer of 10 November from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, *Official Report*, column *441*, if he will arrange for all ministers' e-mail addresses to be included in the House of Commons telephone directory or made available to Right hon. and hon. Members in some other form. [15846]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The question of whether or not Ministers' e-mail addresses are made publicly available is not a matter for the Committee.

CABINET OFFICE

Millennium Dome

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Minister without Portfolio, how much has been spent so far on *(a)* consultants and *(b)* advertisers in relation to the Millennium Dome at Greenwich; and if he will make a statement. [13278]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The New Millennium Experience Company has employed, and continues to employ, a range of consultants in a number of specialist fields appropriate to a project of this scale and nature, including engineering, planning and transport. In all cases the procedures adopted with such companies, including advertising agents, meet the requirements which apply to all non-departmental public bodies for the purchase of goods, services and equipment. Details of individual contracts are commercially confidential but the NMEC has been involved in 51 (completed and current) contracts with third parties to date.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister without Portfolio if he will estimate how much has been spent on policing the Millennium Dome site in each month since the start of construction; what is the projected expenditure for the remaining months prior to completion; and if he will make a statement. [14235]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* In June 1997, and after open competition, the New Millennium Experience Company contracted with a local Greenwich company to provide security on the Millennium Experience site. The terms of the contract are commercial in confidence. The site security work has recently been the subject of a new competitive tender exercise following normal procedures for contract renewal. NMEC is now completing its consideration of the bids. English Partnerships have separate contract arrangements to fulfil their responsibilities for security to the whole peninsula site during the construction stage.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Railway Museum

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many locomotives at the National Railway Museum in York are still capable of running; and if he will encourage the exhibition of them in use. [15486]

Mr. Fisher: There are seven locomotives at the National Railway Museum in York still in full running order and two under repair, and twelve other locomotives from the national collection currently operating elsewhere. It is for the Trustees of the Museum to decide how best to display these engines, but it is their policy to retain a proportion of the National Railway Collection in full running order for public demonstration.

Opera and Ballet (London)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he made of the total number of performances in London by English National Opera, English National Ballet, the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera before making his proposal that all these companies should share one venue. [15607]

Mr. Fisher: In the 1996–97 financial year the total number of performances in London by the English National Opera, English National Ballet, the Royal Ballet and the Royal Opera was as follows:

Company	*Performances in London 1996–97*
English National Opera	185
English National Ballet	62
Royal Opera	143
Royal Ballet	111

DEFENCE

Army Storage

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the rationalisation of the Army's storage estate. [16281]

Dr. Reid: Work has now been completed on a study, initiated by the previous Administration, on the potential for further rationalisation of the Army Base Storage and Distribution Agency's storage estate. The analysis has show that there are likely to be some increases in aspects of the Army storage task, for example some equipment and stores return from Bosnia, but the overall balance of factors, including the likely impact of the new Government's Strategic Defence Review, indicates that there will be significant reductions in ABSDA's future storage requirement. This reflects the need to drive down the overall size of the Army storage inventory to reflect changes in Defence planning assumptions and to reduce the costs of our storeholdings. Obtaining greater efficiency from Defence spending is a central part of the Strategic Defence Review. All support activities are being rigorously scrutinised against the benchmark of value for money and the need to ensure that we retain only those assets that are essential for Defence needs.

I have, therefore, decided to accept, as the basis for consultation with the Trades Unions and other interested parties, the recommendation that the ABSDA sub-depots at Thatcham in Berkshire, and Old Dalby in Leicestershire, should close. This would realise savings of some £35 million in net present value terms over a ten-year period. I also intend to suspend the ABSDA stores division CFQ study for the time being.

Final decisions will be taken in the light of representations made during the consultation period. A copy of the Consultation Document is being placed in the library of the House.

Pay and Pensions

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements are being made for the future delivery of pay, pensions and personnel administration services for the armed forces. [16282]

Dr. Reid: My predecessor announced on 20 February this year, *Official Report*, column *720* that the Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency was to be launched as a tri-Service organisation on 1 April, and that plans were in hand to appoint a commercial partner to deliver most of the Agency's services on its behalf. AFPAA was launched on the due date, and the necessary evaluation and approval processes for its partnering contract have now been completed. I have agreed that the contract should be awarded to Electronic Data Systems (Defence) Ltd.

As part of the modernisation of our Armed Forces for the 21st Century, this public-private partnering contract is the beginning of a comprehensive programme of improvement and redevelopment in the delivery of pay, pensions and personnel administrative services. It will bring new skills and technology to this area of work, and, importantly, it will provide the necessary capital, under private finance arrangements, at a level which could not be expected from the Defence budget. The contract will run for up to 12 years at an estimated cost of over £30 million. The effective date for transfer of responsibility to EDS, including staff and capital assets, is planned for 1 January next year. About 900 civilian staff will move permanently to EDS, with 100 military personnel being placed with the company in the first instance.

In about three years' time, elements of the Army Personnel Centre in Glasgow will come under AFPAA's responsibility. This will mean the transfer of a further 500 civilian staff to EDS. There are no plans to relocate these jobs from Glasgow and any proposals would need Ministerial approval.

Contingency and Operational Procurement Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if his Department plans to send inspectors to COPEX events which are eligible for Government joint venture support; [14369]

(2) if he will list the visits to the visits to the 1997 Contingency and Operational Procurement Exhibition by Ministry of Defence inspectors; and what criteria were used to assess the types of equipment and services. [14368]

Mr. Spellar: Because COPEX 1997 was held on Ministry of Defence land, two MOD inspectors visited the exhibiton while it was being set up and during the first open day to assess the suitability for export of the equipment and services on offer. The criteria used were those announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*.

The MOD plays no part in the organisation of COPEX exhibitions and has no plans at the present time to send inspectors to future COPEX events.

Military Exhibitions

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the support provided by his Department and DESO to private military, security and police exhibitions in the last year. [14364]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has provided the following support for defence equipment exhibitions organised by private companies during the past year, all of which attracted host Government support:

Exhibition	*Dates*	*Type of support*
IMDEX Asia 97, Singapore	6 to 9 May 1997	Attended by the Military Deputy to the Head of Defence Export Services. HM Ships Richmond and Illustrious also visited, and DESO had its own exhibition stand.
Paris Air Show	10 to 18 June 1997	Attended by the Minister of State for Defence Procurement, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the Chief of Defence Procurement, and the Head of Defence Export Services. DESO also had its own exhibition stand.

Exhibition	Dates	Type of support
IDEF 97, Turkey	23 to 26 September 1997	Attended by the Head of Defence Export Services. DESO also had its own exhibition stand.
IMDEX 97, Greenwich	7 to 10 October 1997	Opened by the First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff. Keynote address given by the Chief of Defence Procurement. HMS Lancaster also visited.

Discrimination

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish the list of names of employers who have been found to have breached the anti-discrimination legislation at an industrial tribunal and the amount of compensation awarded. [15014]

Dr. Reid: Figures for industrial tribunal applications are held centrally only for those brought by members of the Armed Forces. Figures for cases brought by civilian employees of the Department are not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

All cases brought before an industrial tribunal name the Ministry of Defence as the main respondent but separate figures for each of the Armed forces can be identified. The cost of awards made by industrial tribunals against the Armed Forces for discrimination, excluding those made to women who received compensation arising out of their unlawful dismissal on grounds of pregnancy, are as follows:

	£
Royal Navy	65,000
Army	Nil
Royal Air Force	10,000

In addition, the Ministry of Defence has settled a number of claims either prior to or during industrial tribunal hearings as follows:

	£
Royal Navy	191,000
Army	777,300
Royal Air Force	31,944

In the case of those women unlawfully dismissed from the Services on grounds of pregnancy the average award was £11,445. The overall figures were as follows:

	£
Royal Navy	13,898,746.38
Army	21,760,119.65
Royal Air Force	21,612,724.84

Organophosphates

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will place in the Library the background note that accompanied the draft answer to the question by the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent, 11 July, *Official Report*, column *436*, on organophosphate pesticide use; [14764]

(2) if he will place in the Library a copy of the fax dated 18 July 1994, sent by the Department of Entomology at the Royal Medical College, London to the Department of Health concerning insecticides used in the Gulf war cited in his Department's recent memorandum relating to provision of advice to Ministers between 1994 and 1996 on organophsphate pesticide use during the Gulf War. [14708]

Dr. Reid: No. The information contained within these documents is advice to Ministers and as such is covered by exemption 2 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. On an exceptional basis, the information from these documents relating to organophosphate pesticides has already been made available in the Further Memorandum on the provision of advice to Ministers on the use of OP pesticides during the Gulf War, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Offset Exhibition

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance the Ministry of Defence and its agencies gave to the organisers of the Offset exhibition at the North Wales Centre, Aberconwy; and what was the cost to public funds. [15295]

Mr. Spellar: Officials attended this exhibition in the course of their normal duties, but the Ministry of Defence gave no financial support to the organisers.

Defence Exports (Ethical Code)

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many defence companies have sought his Department's assistance over the Government's ethical code on defence exports. [15543]

Mr. Spellar: As part of their normal daily business, officials in the Defence Export Services Organisation provide advice to defence companies on the criteria used by the Government in considering licence applications for the export of conventional arms. It is not practical to identify every company that has sought this advice.

Information Warfare

Mr. Keith Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of the defence budget in *(a)* cash and *(b)* percentage terms is allocated to information warfare. [15335]

Dr. Reid: Information warfare is a broad term which covers all aspects of the security of information and communications systems from front line weapons to office IT equipment. Measures to counter information warfare are integral features of most systems and it is not therefore possible to identify their costs separately.

Non-lethal Weapons

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to introduce non-lethal disabling weapons for peacekeeping and battlefield use. [14415]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* Research is conducted into non-lethal weapon technologies to assess technical options to meet endorsed military capability requirements, but we have no present plans for the procurement of further NLWs.

Eurofighter

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his Department's estimate of the cost of the Eurofighter programme to the United Kingdom and to the participating states as a whole; and how many aircraft are due to be ordered by *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* participating states. [14679]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* The latest estimated procurement cost of the Eurofighter programme is £42.8 billion, £15.9 billion of which is the estimated cost to the UK. The participating nations have declared a total requirement for 620 Eurofighter aircraft, 232 of which are for the UK.

US Defence Trade Report

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the medium-term implications of US Commerce Department report "Offsets in Defense Trade 1997". [15294]

Mr. Spellar: The US Department of Commerce report "Offsets in Defense Trade 1997" is still under consideration by the Ministry of Defence. I will write to the hon. Member in due course.

PRIME MINISTER

Special Advisers

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Prime Minister if he will provide a current list of all *(a)* paid and *(b)* unpaid special advisers to Ministers. [14837]

The Prime Minister: The following are employed as paid Special Advisers:

Appointing Minister	*Name of appointee*
The Prime Minister	Jonathan Powell
	Alastair Campbell
	Anji Hunter
	Kate Garvey
	Tim Allan
	Hilary Coffman
	David Miliband
	Roger Liddle
	James Purnell
	Derek Scott
	Robert Hill
	Geoff Mulgan
	Geoffrey Norris
	Pat Macfadden
	Peter Hyman
	Liz Lloyd
	Roz Preston (part-time)
	Fiona Miller (part-time)
Chief Whip	Tom Greatrex
	Kieran Simpson
Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	Cathy McGlynn
	Tim Walker
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport	Julian Eccles (part-time)
	John Newbiggin
Secretary of State for Defence	Bernard Gray
	Alasdair McGowan
Secretary of State for Education and Employment[1]	Conor Ryan
	Hilary Benn
	Sophie Linden (part-time)
	Lisa Barclay (part-time)
Deputy Prime Minister	Joe Irvin
	Paul Hackett (part-time)
	Joan Hammell
	Darren Murphy (part-time)
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	David Clark
	Andrew Hood
Secretary of State for Health	Joe McCrea
	Simon Stevens
Secretary of State for the Home Department	Ed Owen
	Norman Warner
	Ruth Allen (part-time)[2]
Secretary of State for International Development	Jessica Crowe
	Daniel Harris
Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords	Marianne Morris
	Damien Welfare
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland	Anna Healy
	Nigel Warner
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster	Andrew Lappin
	James Cornford
President of the Council[3]	Ian McKenzie
Secretary of State for Scotland	Wendy Alexander
	Murray Elder
Secretary of State for Social Security	Juhn McTernan
	Liz Kendall
President of the Board of Trade	Dan Corry
	Sheila Watson
Minister of Transport	Kate Davies
	Tony Grayling
Chancellor of the Exchequer[4]	Ed Balls
	Charles Whelan
Chief Secretary	Andrew Maugham
	Edward Miliband
Secretary of State for Wales	John Adams
	Huw Roberts

Appointing Minister	*Name of appointee*
The following have been appointed as unpaid Advisers:	
Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment	Dennis Stevenson
Deputy Prime Minister	David Taylor
President of the Board of Trade	Lord Hollick
Minister without Portfolio	Benjamin Wegg-Prosser
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	David Mathieson
Chancellor of the Exchequer	Sue Nye

[1] In addition, Professor Michael Barber has been appointed as Standards and Effectiveness Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

[2] Appointment is time limited to the life of the Task Force on Youth Justice.

[3] In addition, the President of the Council has appointed Keith Hellawell as the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator (from 5 January 1998) and Michael Trace as the Deputy UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator on special adviser terms.

[4] In addition the Chancellor of the Exchequer has appointed Chris Wales and Paul Gregg as members of the Council of Economic Advisers on special adviser terms.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his office has entered into and *(b)* discussions Ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14944]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* For this purpose my Department is the Cabinet Office. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Office of Public Service on 11 November 1997, *Official Report,* columns *463–64.*

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to the oral Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development, *Official Report,* 5 November, column 332, if he will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in his Office. [15487]

The Prime Minister: No. Individual Government Departments are responsible for taking decisions on the goods and services they acquire, taking into account the Government's policy of seeking value for money for the benefit of the taxpayer. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has made clear, the Government are also committed to promoting and supporting ethical trading wherever possible.

Anglo-French Summit

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Prime Minister what was the total cost, including incidental expenses, of preparing and furnishing the rooms in Canary Wharf used for the Anglo-French Summit; and if he will break this down into the main items of expenditure. [15658]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 12 November 1997]:* Canary Wharf was provided for the Summit free of charge. Final figures for the cost of other items are not yet available.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Live Animal Exports

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what information his Department has collated on the number of live animals exported since 1 May; and if he will make a statement. [13964]

Mr. Rooker: The most up-to-date information available to the Department is recorded on the Animal Movement electronic data system. From May to October 1997 inclusive, approximately 263,00 sheep/goats and 93,900 pigs were exported from Great Britain to other EU Member States. This information is provisional and subject to change. There was a significant increase in the number of sheep exported from August to October. This is consistent with normal trade patterns.

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many live sheep were exported in each of the five years up to 1997; how many have been exported so far this year; what was their final destination; and if he will make a statement. [13968]

Mr. Rooker: Official Overseas Trade Statistics show that the following number of sheep were exported from the United Kingdom:

	Number
1992	1,422,000
1993	830,000
1994	989,000
1995	756,000
1996	547,000
January–July 1997	53,000

These figures are provisional and subject to amendment. Certified destinations were principally France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and the Republic of Ireland.

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to the oral statement by the Secretary of State for International Development, *Official Report,* 5 November, column 332, if he will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in his Department. [15502]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer which the Prime Minister has given today. All procurement decisions in the Department are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

Rothamsted Experimental Station

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to continue the long-term experiments at Rothamsted Experimental station. [15854]

Mr. Rooker: Rothamsted is one of the three research sites making up the Institute of Arable Crops Research. MAFF is a major customer for research at IACR and will spend over £7 million in the current year. Rothamsted runs several long-term experiments, some of which have contributed information to the main MAFF research

programmes at the site dealing with nutrient loss, soil organic matter and biodiversity. However, this core long-term work is funded by BBSRC and other funders and is not the direct responsibility of MAFF.

Farmland Birds

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his letter of 8 October concerning the agri-environment programme and farmland birds (108634), when he expects to respond to the three-year BTO project interim report. [14468]

Mr. Rooker: I expect to respond when final results of the British Trust for Ornithology project, due in October 1998, are available and have been assessed.

Meanwhile, steps taken to help reserve the decline in farmland birds were outlined by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on 27 October, *Official Report*, column *715*.

Cattle Slaughter Scheme

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his plans for the incineration of meat and bone meal produced from the cull of animals under the over 30-months-scheme. [15766]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are considering a number of options for the disposal of meat and bone meal arising from the over 30-months-scheme. Revelant elements of the Intervention Board's on-going tender exercise have been suspended to allow time for reflection on the full range of options presenting themselves. While some MBM is being burnt in a high temperature waste incinerator at Fawley, no decision has yet been taken on any other disposal option, or options, for the stored material, including burning MBM for energy recovery in power stations. In reaching a decision, full weight will be given to the protection of human health and the environment.

WALES

Military Exports

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has met representatives of Welsh business to explain the Government's policy on the sale and supply of military, security and police equipment to oppressive regimes. [15298]

Mr. Hain: No. I refer my hon. Friend to the statement given by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on 28 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *26–29*, which sets out the Government's policy on this subject.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the significance to the Welsh economy of the manufacture, sale and supply of military, security and police equipment; and if he will place a copy of his assessment in the Library. [15292]

Mr. Hain: The Department of Trade and Industry has been studying the value of the defence industry to the UK but its emphasis has been national and has not included production of detailed figures on a regional basis.

A copy of "The Study of the Value of the Defence Industry to the UK Economy" of December 1995 was placed in the Library of the House.

US Defence Trade Report

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the medium-term implications of US Commerce Department report, "Offsets in Defence Trade 1997". [15293]

Mr. Hain: The US Department of Commerce report "Offsets in Defence Trade 1997" is under consideration by the Ministry of Defence.

Cycling

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to encourage the use of bicycles as an alternative to cars in Welsh cities and towns; and if he will make a statement. [15304]

Mr. Hain: The Government are considering the role of cycling, alongside that of all transport modes, as part of their development of an integrated transport policy to be set out in a White Paper next year. I intend to publish a Welsh Transport Policy Statement at around the same time.

I have already taken one practical step to give local authorities more scope to promote cycling through the changes to the Welsh Transport Grant regime which I announced in June. These will allow support to be given in future to "integrated transport packages" which can, among other things, include measures to promote cycling.

TREASURY

Health Service Expenditure

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate in cash terms in 1995–96 prices the changes for 1997–98 and 1998–99 in NHS expenditure between *(a)* the 1996 budget plans and *(b)* the Government's latest plans. [13189]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* In the July Budget an additional £1.2 billion was allocated for the NHS in 1998–99, and on 14 October a further package of £300 million was announced for patient care in 1997–98. These figures can be converted into 1995–96 prices using the current forecasts for the GDP deflator which are 2.76 per cent. for 1996–97, 2.75 per cent. for 1997–98 and 2.75 per cent. for 1998–99.

Income Tax

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what would be the effect on the number of people of working age who face combined marginal rates of withdrawal of tax, national insurance contributions and means-tested benefits of *(a)* under 50 per cent., *(b)* 50–59 per cent., *(c)* 60–69 per cent., *(d)* 70–79 per cent., *(e)* 80–89 per cent. and *(f)* 90 per cent. or above of introducing a 10p starting rate of income tax on (i) the first £1,000, (ii) the first £1,500 or (iii) the first £2,000 of taxable income. [14016]

Dawn Primarolo: The effect of introducing a 10p tax rate on marginal deduction rates, and on disposable income, would depend on what other changes were made to the tax and benefit system at the time of its introduction.

Cash Limits

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Departments overspent their allocated budget in financial year 1996–97; by how much each overspent its allocated budget; which Departments have had to reduce their budgets in financial year 1997–98 as a consequence; which Departments were allowed a claim on the reserve for all or part of their overspend; and how much each Department was allowed to claim from the reserve. [14026]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* The Ministry of Defence breached its overall cash limit for 1996–97 by £246 million. It was the only Department to do so. No claim on the Reserve was agreed in respect of the overspend in 1996–97, but the overspend did increase the control total outturn for 1996–97. Following an investigation into the causes of the breach it was decided that the Ministry of Defence should reduce its overall cash limit for 1997–98 by £168 million.

The reduction in 1997–98 is less than the overspend for two reasons. The first is that the Ministry of Defence received £40 million of extra receipts in 1996–97 which could not be appropriated in aid of the Ministry's Votes, because no provision had been made for them in the Estimates presented to Parliament. These receipts had to be surrendered by the Ministry directly to the Consolidated Fund, and so they could not be included in calculating the Ministry's overspend against the cash limit on its votes. Allowance was made for this in determining the size of the reduction in the cash limit in 1997–98. Secondly, allowance was also made for certain technical adjustments made during the course of 1996–97 in connection with the sale of the married quarters estate. These amounted to £38 million.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will publish the action plan, due by 1 October 1997, for resolving the computer millennium problem in his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible; if such was fully completed on time; and if he will make a statement; [13562]

(2) what is his latest estimate of the total cost of resolving the computer millennium problem in *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* other public bodies for which he is responsible; if he will state in each case (i) expenditure incurred to date, (ii) expenditure planned for 1997–98, (iii) expenditure planned for 1998–99 and (iv) expenditure planned for 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [13563]

Mr. Liddell *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The majority of my Departments and agencies have submitted their costed plans to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency on schedule. Those that have not will be doing so shortly.

The plans will be analysed by the Central Information Technology Unit and the CCTA and the conclusions reported to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who will then inform Parliament. The Plans will be exempted from disclosure under the Open Government Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, which permits non-disclosure prior to an announcement. However, once the announcement has been made the plans will be available to the public.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department, its agencies and other public bodies for which he is responsible completed the millennium computer compliance audits of systems; and if he will make a statement. [13565]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* Year 2000 system audits and inventories were completed by my departments and agencies as follows:

	Date
Treasury	September 1996
Inland Revenue	November 1996 (January 1997 for Valuation Office agency)
Customs and Excise	December 1996
Royal Mint[1]	September 1997
National Savings	July 1997
Office for National Statistics	September 1997

[1] Systems are regularly reviewed. Date given is for last review.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which *(a)* Minister and *(b)* civil servant has overall responsibility for ensuring millennium computer compliance in his Department and its associated public bodies. [13566]

Mr. Gordon Brown *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* In view of the importance we are giving to the Year 2000 issue, I will be taking overall responsibility for ensuring that my departments' and agencies' IT systems are compliant. At official level, those with overall responsibility are as follows:

	Responsibility
Treasury	Head of IT services
Inland Revenue[1]	Deputy Director for the Business and Management Services division
Customs and Excise	Head of Corporate Development group
Royal Mint	Head of IT
National Savings	Director of Operations
Office for National Statistics	Director of Survey and Statistical Services division

[1] Includes Valuation Office.

Departmental Savings

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy for 1997–98 and 1998–99 that savings achieved in one Department can be switched to another Department; and if he will make a statement. [13645]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* The Government are committed to holding to the Control Totals for 1997–98 and 1998–99. Within that it may be appropriate on occasions to find savings from one

Department to cover increases in another as was done with the NHS this year. Minor transfers will continue in the normal course of business—for example, to meet the costs of new policy initiatives which fall outside the originating Department.

National Health Service

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to make further allocations of expenditure to the National Health Service in 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13292]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has no plans to make further allocations of expenditure to the National Health Service in 1997–98. An extra £300 million for patient care this winter was announced on 14 October 1997, which has been made available by a reallocation of £270 million from other Department's budgets, plus £30 million in new administrative savings identified within the NHS in England.

Departmental Spending Totals

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy that the existing departmental spending totals for 1998–99 will be adhered to; what is his policy on the transfer of expenditure savings from one Department to another for 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [13286]

Mr. Darling *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* The Government are committed to holding to the Control Total for 1998–99. Departments known their baselines for 1998–99 and are planning spending accordingly. There are no current plans to reallocate spending between Departments but it may be appropriate on occasion to find savings from one Department to cover increases in another as was done with the NHS this year. Minor transfers will continue in the normal course of business—for example, to meet the cost of new policy initiatives which fall outside the originating Departments.

Inheritance Tax

Mr. John Cryer: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the additional annual revenue which would accrue to the Treasury if the inheritance tax threshold was returned to the former rate of £150,000. [14704]

Dawn Primarolo: The full-year effect in 1997–98 of lowering the inheritance tax threshold from £215,000 to £150,00 is estimated to be an increase of £575 million in inheritance tax liability.

Casinos

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what differences in taxation methods apply between bets placed in *(a)* casinos and *(b)* betting shops; and if he will make a statement. [14911]

Dawn Primarolo: The gross gaming yield duty of a casino is liable to gaming duty. The gross gaming yield consists of the total value of stakes, minus players' winnings, on games in which the house is banker and participation charges on games in which the bank is shared by players.

Gaming duty is a tiered duty which ranges from 2½ per cent. to 33⅓ per cent. It is charged on each set of premises at which dutiable gaming takes place. The present charging structure for each set of premises is shown below.

Part of gross gaming yield	*Rate (per cent.)*
The first £450,000	2½
The next £2,250,000	12½
The next £2,700,000	25
The remainder	33⅓

Bets placed with a bookmaker in a betting shop are liable to general betting duty. Duty is due on the total amount staked by betters on all off-course bets. The rate of general betting duty is currently 6¾ per cent.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to review the system of taxation of casinos. [14912]

Dawn Primarolo: Gaming duty replaced gaming licence duty on 1 October 1997. A post-implementation review will be conducted after 12 months to evaluate the impact of the changes.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the current licence fee paid by casinos; and if he will make a statement. [14913]

Dawn Primarolo: The requirement for a revenue gaming licence for casinos was removed when gaming duty replaced gaming licence duty on 1 October 1997.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was, in each of the last three years *(a)* the total amount taken by the casino industry across gaming tables and *(b)* the total amount paid by the casino industry by way of gaming licence duty in (i) Greater London and (ii) the United Kingdom excluding Greater London. [14914]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs do not record gaming licence duty receipts in a manner which allows for regional analysis. The annual receipts for the last three years are shown below.

Gaming licence duty receipts

(£'000s)

	Number
1994–95	72,263
1995–96	84,087
1996–97	79,407

Unemployment

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what proportion of people becoming unemployed cease to be unemployed within a year *(a)* in total and *(b)* broken down into (i) under-25s, (ii) those aged 25 to 44 and (iii) those over 44 years. [14939]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Chief Executive of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. David Willetts, dated 13 November 1997:

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has asked me to reply, as the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), to your recent question on the proportion of people who become unemployed that cease to be unemployed within one year, broken down by age groups.

The ONS measure of unemployment, derived from the quarterly Labour Force Survey, is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and counts as unemployed people who are: a) without a paid job; b) available to start work within the next two weeks and c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained.

ONS also publishes the monthly claimant court, which is based on the administrative system which records all people claiming unemployment-related benefits (i.e. Jobseekers Allowance or National Insurance credits) at Employment Service offices on the day of the monthly count, who on that day had signed on as unemployed and available to do any suitable work.

The information requested can only be derived from the claimant count, as the Labour Force Survey is unable to track individuals over time. The results are shown in the attached table.

Proportion of joiners to the claimant count in the 12 months to October 1996 who left the count within 12 months, by age

Age of claimant at start of claim	*Proportion of joiners that left within 12 months* *Per cent.*
Under 25	90.5
25 to 44	87.3
Over 44	86.8
All ages	88.4

Source:
JUVOS 5 per cent. cohort file (October 1997).

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the oral Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development, *Official Report*, 5 November, column 332, if he will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in his Department. [15499]

Mr. Geoffrey Robinson: I refer to the answer which the Prime Minister has given today. All procurement decisions in the Treasury are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

VAT (Energy-saving Materials)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Treasury review on reducing VAT on energy-saving materials will be published. [15620]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs have completed their review and are now preparing their report.

Exchange Rates

Dr. Fox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measurements of currency of invoice he makes in assessing the short-run impact of exchange rates changes on the economy; and if he will publish the data for the last five years. [15457]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* Publication of regular data on currency of invoice ceased in 1988. Data for 1984–88 were provided to the hon. Member on 4 November 1997, *Official Report*, columns *101-02* in response to previous questions and the available evidence suggests that use of foreign currency is fairly stable over time.

These data are used to inform the Treasury's assessment of the short-run impact of exchange rate changes on the economy.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what arrangements he has made for receiving observations on the document "UK Membership of the Single Currency: An Assessment of the Five Economic Tests"; and if he will publish a document containing the comments and conclusions of her Majesty's Government to any material received by them in relation to potential advantages and disadvantages of economic and monetary union. [15747]

Mrs. Liddell: Observations on the document in question can be addressed to Treasury Ministers. The Treasury has already published a report on the pros and cons of EMU by David Currie. There are no plans to publish a further document containing comments and conclusions on that report or on the assessment of the five economic tests. The Chancellor has said that a period of preparation is needed now, to address the practical steps that government and business will need to take before a final decision to join the single currency.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Trent Engine

Mr. Laxton: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress has been made on Rolls-Royce's application for launch aid for the new Trent engine. [16392]

Mr. Battle: I am pleased to announce that the Government have agreed to provide a long-term investment of up to £200 million over the next four years to Rolls-Royce plc. towards the design and development of its important new range of Trent engines. This will extend the Trent family to enable it to power all the world's new large aircraft. For example, the Trent 500 has been selected by Airbus Industrie as the powerplant for the new A340-500/600, in a privileged partnership announced at the Paris Air Show in June 1997.

The Government's support reflects the importance of this project to the UK economy and the clearly established need for public funds to enable it to go ahead. The agreement with Rolls-Royce embodies the Government's commitment to public–private partnerships and is a marked departure from the previous administration's approach to the civil aviation industry.

The investment is genuinely commercial, and reflects the risk that the taxpayer has been asked to share. The Government and Rolls-Royce will share, as partners, in the future rewards from this engine programme. The Government intend that this approach will inform the consideration of any future applications for support from the civil aviation industry.

Rolls-Royce is the 10th largest UK investor in research and development and much of its technology is diffused to other sectors of the Uk economy. The Trent engine has already demonstrated its technical excellence and these new developments will help to ensure that Rolls-Royce remains a world leader in aero-engine technology and continues to provide a centre of excellence in the United Kingdom. Success in this new Trent range will bring wider benefits to the many companies which supply Rolls-Royce, and increase competition for worldwide sales of aero-engines to the advantage of UK airlines and airline passengers.

My Department will be discussing this investment with the European Commission.

Computers (Century Date Change)

Mr. Cotter: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if Government Departments have now reported on their preparedness for the year 2000 problem; and when the results will be published. [14994]

Mr. David Clark: I have been asked to reply.

Within Government itself, Departments and Agencies are responsible for their own systems. The Central Information Technology Unit, through its agent the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency supports the public sector. As part of that support CITU and CCTA have identified a programme of action to ensure that Government's response to the year 2000 problem is co-ordinated and coherent. This involves each Government Department providing me with detailed and costed plans for dealing with the year 2000 date change problem as soon as possible after 1 October 1997.

I am awaiting an analysis and report on these plans from the CITU and the CCTA so that I can form an overall picture of progress, costs and future plans. Once I have done so I will inform Parliament.

US Defence Trade Report

Ann Clwyd: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what assessment she has made of the medium-term implications of US Commerce Department report "Offsets in Defence Trade 1997". [15290]

Mr. Spellar: I have been asked to reply as responsibility for the subject matter falls to the Ministry of Defence.

The US Department of Commerce report "Offsets in Defence Trade 1997" is still under consideration by the Ministry of Defence. I will write to my hon. Friend in due course.

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what estimate she has made of the expenditure by *(a)* her Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies, on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if she will make a statement. [13263]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* Expenditure on external tax advice is undertaken in accordance with Treasury guidance. Information relating to expenditure on specific external advice is not held centrally and can only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Chief Executives of the Department's Executive Agencies have been asked to respond separately.

Letter from Seton Bennett to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 13 November 1997:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply on behalf of the National Weights and Measures Laboratory to your question about expenditure on tax consultants and other external tax advice.

This Agency has not made any use of such consultants during the years in question and our expenditure has therefore been nil.

Letter from Ian Jones to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 13 November 1997:

You tabled a Parliamentary Question to the President of the Board of Trade, for named day reply on 5 November, about expenditure by her Department, its agencies and non departmental bodies on tax consultants and other external tax advice. I have been asked to reply in respect of the Employment Tribunals Service.

The Employment Tribunals Service has not incurred any expenditure in either of the areas you asked about.

Letter from P. R. S. Hartnack to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 13 November 1997:

I am replying for the Patent Office to your Parliamentary Question to the President of the Board of Trade about the cost of tax consultants and external tax advice.

The Patent Office has made no payments in this respect in 1995/96, 1996/97 and 1997/98 to date. No such transactions are expected in the remainder of 1997/98.

Letter from Peter Joyce to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 13 November 1997:

The President of the Board of Trade has asked me to reply to your question about expenditure by The Insolvency Service on tax consultants and other external advice in 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98.

Its expenditure has been as follows:

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Tax Consultants	Nil	Nil	Nil
External tax advice	Nil	£800	Nil

Letter from John Holden to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 13 November 1997:

I have been asked to reply to your question to the President of the Board of Trade concerning i) tax consultants and ii) tax advice and comment as follows:

(i) Companies House has expended the following amounts on tax consultants:

1995–96: £282

1996–97: £141

1997–98: Nil

ii) No other external tax advice has been engaged.

Letter from Jim Norton to Mr. Malcolm Bruce, dated 13 November 1997:

Mrs. Roche, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Small Firms, Trade and Industry, has asked me to reply on behalf of the Radiocommunications Agency to your Question about Agency expenditure on tax consultants and other external tax advice.

The Agency has been advised on PAYE matters by Fraser Russell during the relevant period and the actual and estimated expenditure details are as follows:

(1) 1995–96: £3,150.00

(2) 1996–97: £2,800.00

(3) 1997–98: £2,852.00 (estimated).

All figures exclude VAT, which is recoverable by the Agency.

Investment (Multilateral Agreement)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what progress has been made in pressing for the Multilateral Agreement on Investment to include a legal requirement for parties not to lower environmental or labour standards in order to attract foreign investment. [15474]

Mrs. Roche: Draft text on this issue has been discussed at the negotiations of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in Paris. The UK is at the forefront of widespread but not universal support for such a legal requirement. We will continue to press the case up to the conclusion of the negotiations in April 1998.

Animal Testing (Product Labelling)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what plans she has to make the use of animal testing a criterion for product labelling; and if she will make a statement. [13688]

Mr. Nigel Griffiths *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The only animal testing issues for which my Department is responsible arise from regulations governing the supply of cosmetic products. This legislation, the Cosmetic Products (Safety) Regulations 1996, requires that where claims are made about the animal testing status of cosmetic products they should state clearly whether the tests carried out involved the product itself or its ingredients.

The Cosmetics Directive (76/768/EEC), which the Regulations implement, is unsatisfactory in its treatment of animal testing issues. In particular, the ban on using ingredients which have been tested on animals (currently deferred until 30 June 2000) does not in any case apply to finished products which may have been tested on animals. I intend to press the Commission to bring forward proposals to amend the Directive and would expect other related issues, such as compulsory labelling of animal testing, to be raised by animal welfare groups at the same time. I shall, of course, consult the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection and other interested parties.

Defence Exports

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will list the number of export licences refused in respect of defence exports in each of the years 1979 to 1996. [15181]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 10 November 1997]:* I refer the hon. Member to my letter of 3 September to the hon. Member for Westbury (Mr. Faber) pursuant to my answer to him of 31 July, *Official Report*, column *627*. A copy of that letter has been placed in the Library of the House.

This answer should be read in the context of my answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

Nuclear Safety (Former Soviet Union)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the safeguards training assistance currently being conducted by British Nuclear Fuels in the former Soviet Union. [14716]

Mr. Battle: My Department has in recent years funded a range of collaborative activities designed to help improve nuclear safeguards and nuclear materials accountancy and control arrangements in the former Soviet Union. Details have been provided in papers presented at a number of international safeguards symposia, copies of which have been placed in the Library of the House.

Work involving safeguards experts from BNFL and their counterparts from the Mayak reprocessing plant in Russia has been a particularly important aspect of these activities. This has yielded improvements in nuclear materials accountancy practices at Mayak and also recommendations on further work necessary to bring these practices into line with those at more modern reprocessing plants. The substantial funding necessary to implement fully the recommended programme of nuclear materials accountancy improvements at Mayak is being sought from the European Union's TACIS programme.

China

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the current level of trade between Britain and China. [14692]

Mrs. Roche: The latest information on the level of trade between the UK and China is given in the table.

UK trade with China—current prices, balance of payments basis

£ million

	Goods			*Services*		
	Exports	*Imports*	*Total trade*	*Exports*	*Imports*	*Total trade*
1990	451	539	990	197	67	264
1991	311	651	962	187	74	261
1992	420	883	1,303	142	82	224
1993	748	1,272	2,020	163	126	289
1994	861	1,582	2,443	180	152	332
1995	826	1,829	2,655	200	160	360
1996	740	2,087	2,827	225	150	375

Source:

United Kingdom Balance of Payments, The Pink Book, 1997, ONS.

Information on UK trade in services is only available for our major trading partners.

More up to date figures, for trade in goods only, are available on an Overseas Trade Statistics basis (the main difference between these and the figures on a Balance of Payments basis is that imports, on an OTS basis, include the costs of freight and insurance.

UK trade in goods—current prices, overseas trade statistics basis

£ million

Janaury to September	*Exports*	*Imports*	*Total trade*
1996	645	1,611	2,257
1997	523	1,787	2,309

Source:
Monthly Review of External Trade Statistics, ONS.

The main commodities traded in 1996 were as follows:

	£ million
Top 5 UK exports to China	
Specialised industrial machinery	112.4
General industrial machinery	98.0
Telecommunications and sound equipment	91.5
Power generating machinery	73.2
Electrical machinery nes[1]	38.5
Top 5 UK imports from India	
Articles of apparel and clothing accessories	341.4
Electrical machinery nes[1]	154.4
Telecommunications and sound equipment	130.8
Textile yarn, fabrics, made-up articles, nes[1]	115.6
Manufactures of metal nes[1]	112.1
Office machines and automatic data processing equipment	99.3

[1] Not elsewhere specified within the Standard International Trade Classification.

Information on UK trade in services with individual countries is only available annually.

Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise.

Yemen

Mr. Vaz: To ask the President of the Board of Trade if she will make a statement on the current level of trade between Britain and Yemen. [14973]

Mrs. Roche: The latest information on the level of trade between the UK and Yemen is given in the table.

UK trade in goods with Yemen—current prices, overseas trade statistics basis

£ million

	Goods		
	Exports	*Imports*	*Total*
1990	70.8	36.2	107.1
1991	65.2	16.8	82.0
1992	78.4	56.9	135.3
1993	85.5	16.1	101.5
1994	74.6	5.1	79.6
1995	66.8	4.1	70.9
1996	74.2	8.4	82.6

Source:
United Kingdom Balance of Payments, the Pink Book, 1997, ONS.
Information on UK trade in services is only available for our major trading partners.

More up-to-date figures, for trade in goods only, are available on an Overseas Trade Statistics basis (the main difference between these and figures on a Balance of Payments basis is that imports, on an OTS basis, include the costs of freight and insurance):

UK trade in goods—current prices, overseas trade statistics basis

£ million

January to September	*Exports*	*Imports*	*Total*
1996	52.7	6.8	59.4
1997	54.5	4.6	59.1

Source:
Monthly Review of External Trade Statistics, ONS.

The main commodities traded in 1996 were as follows:

	£ million
Top five UK exports to Yemen	
Paper, paperboard and articles of paper pulp	7.5
Power generating machinery and equipment	4.5
Chemical materials and products nes[1]	4.4
Professional, scientific and controlling instruments	3.4
General industrial machinery	3.0
Top five UK imports from Yemen	
Professional, scientific and controlling instruments	4.5
Power generating machinery and equipment	2.4
Telecommunications and sound recording equipment	0.6
Specialised industrial machinery	0.3
Transport equipment excluding road vehicles	0.2

[1] Not elsewhere specified within the Standard International Trade Classification.

Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics of the United Kingdom, HM Customs and Excise.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what percentage of claims for disability living allowance have been *(a)* refused and *(b)* granted after appeal in each month since April 1996 in (i) Great Britain and (ii) each region. [14737]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

Disability Living Allowance statistics do not distinguish between reviews and appeals relating to first claims, and reviews and appeals relating to existing awards. A claim may be successful on review or appeal for a variety of reasons, for example because additional information has been received or the claimant's condition has deteriorated.

Disability living allowance: claims reviews and appeals[1,2]

	Initial claims decided		*Reviews decided*		*Appeals decided*	
	total	*refusals*	*Total*	*successful*	*total*	*successful*
April 1996	41,533	22,255	22,461	9,224	2,542	1,648
May 1996	45,576	24,234	27,253	11,352	2,769	1,744
June 1996	41,969	22,360	29,381	12,109	2,964	1,784
July 1996	46,049	24,949	34,119	14,036	3,013	1,811
August 1996	41,791	21,937	31,781	12,700	2,900	1,731
September 1996	43,219	22,869	26,231	10,578	2,899	1,720
October 1996	50,536	26,930	32,078	12,923	3,766	2,227
November 1996	45,754	24,302	32,429	12,786	3,366	1,946
December 1996	34,822	18,515	24,151	9,461	2,660	1,595
January 1997	43,750	23,235	37,924	14,871	3,558	1,979
February 1997	40,603	22,317	32,603	12,521	2,746	1,521
March 1997	40,193	22,223	28,923	11,194	2,368	1,358
April 1997	43,133	24,121	32,757	12,712	3,200	1,761
May 1997	36,489	19,706	27,895	10,533	2,620	1,465
June 1997	41,696	23,139	21,458	8,022	3,054	1,705
July 1997	46,259	25,756	33,513	12,854	3,300	1,898
August 1997	37,621	20,610	32,152	11,976	2,724	1,503
September 1997	41,453	22,489	33,354	12,454	3,201	1,605
October 1997	43,697	23,945	37,095	12,972	3,183	1,560

[1] Reviews were made by adjudication officers in the Benefits Agency. Claimants dissatisfied with reviews can appeal to the Independent Tribunal Service.
[2] Both the reviews and appeals figures for a given month will feature initial claims decided in an earlier month.

Lone Parents

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the timetable for extending the Government's new deal for lone parents to the west midlands. [15478]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Phase 1 of the New Deal for Lone Parents is already available in parts of the West Midlands, offering a comprehensive package of back-to-work help for lone parents—including advice with jobsearch, training, childcare and benefits. In the West Midlands the New Deal for Lone Parents is available in Atherstone, Bedworth, Halesowen, Dudley, Kenilworth, Kidderminister, Leamington Spa, Nuneaton, Rugby, Stourbridge, Stourport on Severn and Stratford on Avon.

The New Deal for Lone Parents will be extended to all remaining parts of the West Midlands when it is rolled out across the country from October 1998.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what investment is being made to ensure that there are satisfactory levels of child care support under the new deal for lone parents. [15479]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The Government recognise the importance of good quality affordable child care for all working parents, particularly for lone parents who have to cope with bringing up children alone. That is why, when we launched the New Deal for Lone Parents in July this year, additional funds were made available to meet the child care expenses of lone parents who are undertaking jobsearch activities.

New Deal advisers can offer up to £60 per week to each lone parent to help them pay for child care while they attend job interviews or training. New Deal advisers also have access to information on local child care services so that they can help lone parents find the most suitable child care for their children while they are at work.

The first phase of the Government's New Deal for Lone Parents, operating in eight areas, has allocated £314,000 for child care during jobsearch in the current financial year 1997–98. Half of this sum has been put aside for these items for the remainder of the first phase, from 1 April to 30 September 1998. For the national programme, estimated costs being used for planning purposes are in the region of £2.5 million for child care during jobsearch for 1998–99, with increased sums for following years. In addition a further £50 million during the lifetime of the Parliament will be set aside to extend help with child care costs through the in-work benefits.

Lone parents in phase one of the New Deal for Lone Parents—including in the West Midlands—are already benefiting from this measure.

Mortgage Interest Payments

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will calculate what the standard rate for mortgage interest payments for people on benefits would be on the basis of including bank mortgage rates equally with main building society rates. [15078]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The standard rate for mortgage interest payments for people on benefits would currently be 7.66 per cent. if bank rates had been included equally with the main building society rates.

Note:

The revised Financial Statistics Table 7.1L gives the composite building society and bank rate produced by the Building Societies Commission and the Bank of England. The rate of 7.66 per cent. is for the same point in time as the current Standard Interest Rate (7.57 per cent.).

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if former building societies are included in the weighted average basic rates for calculating the standard rate for mortgage interest payments for people on benefits; and if she will make a statement. [15079]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The standard rate for mortgage interest payments for people on benefits does not take account of basic mortgage rates of the Halifax or Alliance and Leicester, but currently does take account of basic mortgage rates of the Woolwich and Northern Rock.

Pensions

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is the planned timetable for the development of stakeholder pensions. [15480]

Mr. Denham: We will be making an announcement about the publication of a consultation document on Stakeholder Pensions shortly.

Following consultation we plan to publish more detailed proposals for Stakeholder Pensions alongside our proposals for the long-term framework for pension reform, in the first half of 1998.

War Pensions

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the names, qualifications and experience of the members of the panel reviewing war pensions for noise-induced hearing loss. [13115]

Mr. Denham: The Chairman and members of the review team are:

Chairman:

Sir Kenneth Calman KCB, MD, FRCS, FRSE

Chief Medical Officer

Members:

Professor Adrian Davis BSc, MSc, PhD

Head of Epidemiology, Public Health and Clinical Section

Medical Research Council, Institute of Hearing Research

Nottingham.

Professor Linda Luxon BSc, FRCP

Professor of Audiological Medicine

University College London Medical School.

Professor Mark Lutman BSc, MSc, PhD

Professor of Audiology

Institute of Sound and Vibration Research

University of Southampton.

Dr. Guy Lightfoot BSc, MSc, PhD

Senior Audiological Scientist

Department of Clinical Engineering

Royal Liverpool Hospital.

Member and Secretary:

Dr. Elizabeth Braidwood BSc, MBChB, MRCP(UK), MRCGP

War Pensions Medical Policy Adviser.

Earnings Disregards

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will estimate what the level of all earnings disregards under income support, family credit and housing benefit would be had they been uprated in line with earnings since 1988. [12779]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The information is set out in the table.

Benefit	*Rate when introduced* (£)	*Date of introduction* (£)	*Current rate* (£)	*Value if increased in line with earnings since date introduced* (£)
Income support	5	April 1988	5	8.50
	10	October 1996	10	10.40
	15	April 1988	15	25.60
Family credit	51.45	April 1988	77.15	87.70
Family credit child care disregard	40	October 1994	60	44.75
Housing benefit	5	April 1988	5	8.50
	10	April 1988	10	17.10
	15	April 1988	15	25.60
	15	April 1988	25	25.60
Housing benefit child care disregard	40	October 1994	60	44.75

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to the oral Statement by the Secretary State for International Development, *Official Report*, 5 November, column 332, if she will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in her Department. [15498]

Mr. Field: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer the Prime Minister has given today. All procurement decisions in this Department are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Tax Advice

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is the policy of his Deparmtent on the purchase of tax avoidance advice; and if he will make a statement. [13260]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 5 November 1997]*: A non-departmental public body sponsored by this Department sought external advice in 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98 to enable it to comply with its statutory tax obligations. This Department has in 1997–98 sought limited external advice on issues arising under another country's tax laws. In neither case was this advice sought for tax avoidance purposes.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what estimate he has made of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies, on (i) tax consultants and (ii) other external tax advice in (1) 1995–96, (2) 1996–97 and (3) 1997–98; and if he will make a statement. [13259]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 5 November 1997]:* Spending by this Department, its executive agency, and non-departmental public bodies on tax consultants and other external tax advice was as follows:

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
(a) FCO			
(i) Consultants	0	0	0
(ii) Other	0	0	[1]£7,000
(b) Agency			
(i) Consultants	0	0	0
(ii) Other	0	0	0
(c) NDPBs			
(i) Consultants	0	£5,827	£2,702
(ii) Other	0	0	0

[1] Estimate.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his policy on the resolution to be considered by the First Committee of the UN General Assembly on the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons. [14721]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We are committed to the goal of nuclear disarmament and continue to hold the International Court of Justice in high regard. We have said that we will press for multilateral negotiations towards mutual, balanced and verifiable reductions in nuclear weapons and, when satisfied with progress, will ensure that British nuclear weapons are included in multilateral negotiations. We will, however, vote against the resolution because of its selective quotation of the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on the threat or use of nuclear weapons, and its unrealistic call for time-bound multilateral negotiations.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* his Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other greenhouse gases; if he will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved in the most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate he has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 2010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15543]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the UK's progress in implementing its programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward what the current programme is expected to achieve to 2020.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Belarus

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the support the United Kingdom is giving to the Republic of Belarus in respect of the effects of the Chernobyl disaster on Belarussian children. [15824]

Clare Short: The Untied Kingdom is providing support through the European Commission and other international agencies such as the World Health Organisation for a range of programmes in Belarus designed to ameliorate the effects of the Chernobyl disaster. We have previously provided support directly through our own Environmental Know How Fund for post-Chernobyl programmes, including food screening for radioactive contamination.

Southern Sudan

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will extend short-term emergency aid to the people of the Western Equatorial region in Southern Sudan; and if she will make a statement. [14830]

Clare Short: We are ready to consider proposals put to us to help alleviate the suffering of victims of short-time emergencies in the Western Equatorial region in Southern Sudan. We have already supported three non-governmental Organisation projects in the region this year.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Gender Awareness Training (Judiciary)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will establish gender awareness training for all the judiciary. [15022]

Mr. Hoon: Judicial training is the responsibility of the Judicial Studies Board (JSB), which is a non-departmental governmental body. It has held a number of sessions in both induction and continuation training on equal treatment, including gender awareness, and is considering how training in this area might be developed.

Lay Magistrate training is delivered by Magistrates' Courts' Committees but the JSB has a role is setting the syllabus. Lay Magistrates already address the issue of equal treatment for all in the light of their judicial oath and the JSB has recently begun a study to identify the skills and knowledge required by Lay Magistrates to ensure equality of treatment for all who appear in their courts.

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to the oral Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development, *Official Report*, 5 November, column 332, if he will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in his Department. [15494]

Mr. Hoon: I refer to the answer which the Prime Minister has given today. All procurement decisions in my Department are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prison Service

Ms Beverley Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the Annual Report and Accounts for the Prison Service. [16411]

Mr. Straw: I am pleased to report that I have today published the Prison Service Report and Accounts for 1996–97, along with those for 1995–96. Copies have been placed in the Library.

In future, we will aim to publish Prison Service Annual Reports and Accounts within six months of the end of the financial year.

Lottery Draws

Ms Beverley Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he intends to take to prevent frequent lottery draws in pubs and other premises. [16435]

Mr. George Howarth: The Government have given careful consideration to the issues raised by frequent lottery draws in premises.

The Gaming Board has expressed serious concern to the Government about plans by a company which runs lotteries on behalf of charities under the Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976 to run frequent on-line lotteries in a range of outlets, including pubs and clubs.

The 1976 Act did not contemplate on-line lotteries, and therefore does nothing to prevent them. The use of on-line technology would allow the promotion of successive large scale lottery draws, in a series running through the day, simultaneously in a large number of different outlets.

Such rapid draw lotteries would thus have many of the characteristics of hard gambling. Their unrestricted availability to the public in high streets and neighbourhoods raises serious issues of gambling control.

Such a development in pubs where, of course, alcohol is available, and other public places, would undermine the long-standing policy which this Government fully support, that the harder forms of gambling should be confined to premises specially licensed for gambling, and with appropriate controls.

Under the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, the then Secretary of State for National Heritage used his powers to direct the Director General of the National Lottery not to license games which encourage excessive participation. The Director General himself has made it clear that he does not consider that rapid play lotteries are an appropriate development for the National Lottery.

However, the 1976 Act needs to be strengthened to give sufficient protection in the case of other lotteries.

We therefore propose to introduce legislation to amend the 1976 Act to restrict frequent lottery draws. The measures, which will be introduced in Parliament as soon as possible, will not interfere with existing conventional lotteries run for charitable or other purposes. It will only restrict new forms of rapid draw lottery.

The Government recognise that these lotteries could raise additional money for charities but, given the social risks, we do not consider that the new type of lottery would be an acceptable development. Since this will be primary legislation, those with an interest will have every opportunity to put their points of view in Parliament on the principle and the detail. I am also proposing to publish the legislation in draft form to allow interested parties a few weeks in which to make any representations.

I have placed in the Library an explanatory document which sets out the position in more detail.

Winson Green Prison

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the detention of visitors to Winson Green Prison on 14 October; and how many children were detained. [15191]

Ms Quin: On the morning of 14 October 1997, the movement of all traffic and persons into and out of Birmingham prison was suspended for approximately two and a half hours to forestall a suspected escape attempt. This is in line with security procedures. As a result, 15 adult visitors to prisoners were required to remain in the prison until normal operational procedures could be resumed. There were no children among this number.

Refreshment and toilet facilities were made available and the visitors were kept informed. The prison has apologised to the visitors who were inconvenienced.

Official Hospitality

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on official hospitality for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997. [15234]

Mr. Straw: The information requested is provided in the following table.

Year	*Department* £	*Agencies* £	*Non-departmental public bodies* £
1990–91	30,080	—	1,268
1991–92	28,094	—	1,122
1992–93	19,122	36,529	6,270
1993–94	15,233	33,784	4,427
1994–95	15,990	11,478	6,523
1995–96	22,060	16,544	11,959
1996–97	35,412	26,358	23,289
1 May to 30 September 1997[1]	9,351	17,296	3,232

[1] Provisional.

Unfortunately, information on expenditure on official hospitality in 1980–81 and 1987–88 is no longer available. In addition, the figures for expenditure by the

Department's non-departmental public bodies prior to 1994–95 are incomplete because some of the bodies no longer retain the necessary information.

The figures for expenditure by non-departmental public bodies exclude the Horserace Betting Levy Board and the Horserace Totaliser Board because they are not funded by central Government.

Publicity and Advertising

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the total expenditure on all forms of publicity and advertising by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* non-departmental public bodies for (i) 1993–94, (ii) 1994–95, (iii) 1995–96, (iv) 1996–97, (v) the 1997–98, year to date, (vi) the 1997–98, full year estimate and (vii) the 1998–99 planned expenditure. [15237]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* The costs for publicity, including advertising, for my Department from 1993–94 to 1998–99 are as follows:

Year	*£*
1993–94	14,152,549
1994–95	14,102,358
1995–96	10,869,563
1996–97	8,327,916
1997–98 (year to date)	1,665,176
1997–98 (forecast)	4,923,000
1998–99 (planned)	4,447,000

Expenditure on publicity including advertising by my Department's Agencies was as follows:

Year	*£*
Prison Service	
1993–94	206,900
1994–95	200,00
1995–96	565,014
1996–97	299,778
1997–98 (year to date)	136,828
1997–98 (forecast)	200,000
1998–99 (planned)	not finalised—50,000+
Fire Service College	
1993–94	56,000
1994–95	35,000
1995–96	33,000
1996–97	29,000
1997–98 (year to date)	16,000
1997–98 (forecast)	28,000
1998–99 (planned)	not yet allocated
Passport Agency	
1993–94	79,945
1994–95	127,040
1995–96	94,814
1996–97	143,899
1997–98 (year to date)	12,500
1997–98 (forecast)	33,000
1998–99 (planned)	not yet allocated
Forensic Science Service	
1997–98 (year to date)	280,000
1997–98 (forecast)	387,000
1998–99 (planned)	not yet allocated

Prior to 1997–98, under the Forensic Science Service Agency's framework document, publicity was provided by the Home Office and is included in the departmental spend.

I shall write to the hon. Member, as happened when he last asked a similar question, with regard to expenditure on publicity by my Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies. This information is not held centrally and will take some time to collate.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list each of the overseas trips made by himself and other members of his ministerial team since 2 May, specifying in each case *(a)* the participating Minister or Ministers, *(b)* the destination of the trip, *(c)* the purpose of the trip and *(d)* the cost of the trip; and if he will make a statement. [15236]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* The table gives the information requested including costs for the Ministerial delegation.

Minister	*Dates*	*Destination*	*Purpose*	*Cost £*
Right hon. Jack Straw MP and Joyce Quin MP	26–27 May 1997	Brussels	To attend Justice and Home Affairs Council	5,350
Joyce Quin MP	9–11 June 1997	Prague	To attend meeting of Council of Europe Justice Ministers	2,200
Michael O'Brien MP	28–30 June 1997	Berlin	To attend Oxford Forum tripartite conference with US and Germany on immigration and integration	1,200
Lord Williams of Mostyn QC	15–19 September 1997	Paris, Bonn, Dusseldorf and Oslo	To assess investigation of suspicious deaths procedures, human rights issues and community sentences	3,850
Alun Michael MP	16–19 September 1997	New York	To research voluntary sector issues	10,000
Joyce Quin MP	17–18 September 1997	Paris	To attend meeting with French Minister of Justice	'—
Joyce Quin MP	26–28 September	Siena	To address Anglo-Italian Conference	300
Right hon. Jack Straw MP and Joyce Quin MP	9–10 October 1997	Luxembourg	To attend informal Justice and Home Affairs Council	1,900

Minister	Dates	Destination	Purpose	Cost £
Right hon. Jack Straw MP	20–21 October 1997	Paris	To attend meetings with French Interior Minister and Minister of Justice	2,800
Joyce Quin MP	20–21 October 1997	Strasbourg	To attend European Plenary Meeting	2,000
Joyce Quin MP	4–6 November 1997	Stockholm	To assess prison and probation system	2,900

[1] No expense incurred by Department.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on overseas travel for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (vi) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997; and if he will provide a breakdown to show (1) air fares and (2) other expenditure relating to overseas travel. [15235]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* The available information on overseas travel and related expenditure is as follows:

	(a) Department			*(b) Agencies*			*(c) Non-departmental public bodies*		
Year	*Travel* £	*Related costs* £	*Total* £	*Travel* £	*Related costs* £	*Total* £	*Travel* £	*Related costs* £	*Total* £
1994–95	658,802	823,914	1,482,716	168,372	98,659	267,031	6,766	2,179	8,945
1995–96	993,768	1,455,842	2,449,610	227,762	122,312	350,074	17,067	16,831	33,898
1996–97	1,098,892	1,495,522	2,594,414	128,018	122,665	250,683	13,105	6,298	19,403
1997–98[1]	363,919	465,194	829,113	68,649	42,582	111,231	4,872	5,250	10,122

[1] May to September.

Information relating to 1980–81 is no longer held. That relating to 1987 to 1994, and a separate breakdown relating to air fares, could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Parenting Classes

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proposals he has to introduce minimum standards or qualifications for persons offering parenting classes; and if he will make a statement; [15278]

(2) what proposals he has to set down minimum requirements for the content and duration of training and guidance sessions for parents as described in the consultation paper "Tackling Youth Crime"; and if he will make a statement. [15279]

Mr. Michael: Reform of the youth justice system is one of the Government's key priorities. At the heart of our approach to youth crime are a determination to reassert the importance of personal and social responsibility with more emphasis placed on making young offenders and their parents take more responsibility for their actions. Up to now, insufficient help or attention has been given to parents to change offending behaviour by their children. Action will include the introduction of a new parenting order which will help parents to accept their responsibilities for the behaviour of their children.

The parenting order will contain two elements. There will be an element which allows the court to direct that parents exercise control over their children and an element which allows the court to impose a requirement on parents to attend training and guidance sessions. This latter element of the order can last up to three months and require the parent to attend for no more than one session in any one week. The order will be supervised by a responsible officer who will, in the short term, probably be a member of the Social Services Department. In the longer term, it is envisaged that following the establishment of Youth Offender Teams it will be a member from those teams. We intend to include proposals for the parenting order and the establishment of Youth Offender Teams in the forthcoming Crime and Disorder Bill.

It is envisaged that a Responsible Officer will arrange for the provision of guidance sessions for parents. The introduction of Parenting Orders will be piloted. No decision has yet been made on how we will conduct the pilot exercise. The pilots will allow us to consider appropriate guidance on the best use of the Parenting Order and on standards to be met.

Race Relations

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his plans for section 11 funding; and what assessment he has made of their impact on education funding in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. [15694]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have made it clear that the previous plans which would have meant a reduction in the level of funding from £83 million this year to £43 million next year will not stand. This will be of special significance for Tower Hamlets, which is the largest single recipient of section 11 grant.

We shall shortly let local authorities have more precise information about arrangements after August 1998, when current funding approvals are due to run out.

Immigration Detainees

Mr. Malins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many immigration detainees were held in immigration detention centres and HM prisons or other places of detention on the latest date for which figures are available, setting out the number of detainees at each named establishment and their national origin. [14584]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information on person held in detention under immigration powers as at 30 September 1997 by place of detention and nationality is given in tables 1 to 3.

Table 1: Persons recorded as being in detention[1] solely under Immigration Act powers, by immigration detention centre, as at 30 September 1997

Establishment	*Total detainees*
Campsfield	110
Dover Harbour	8
Harmondsworth	91
Harwich	0
Heathrow's Queen's Building	15
Manchester Airport	9
Tinsley House	149
Total	382

[1] Excluding persons detained in police cells.

Table 2: Persons recorded as being in detention[1] solely under Immigration Act powers, by prison establishment, as at 30 September 1997

Establishment	*Total Detainees*
Aberdeen	4
Belmarsh	9
Birmingham	7
Blakenhurst	2
Bristol	2
Brixton	14
Bullingdom	12
Canterbury	12
Chelmsford	3
Doncaster	3
Durham	3
Elmley	2
Greenock	5
Haslar	138
High Down	35
Holloway	21
Leeds	8
Lewes	3
Liverpool	5
Longriggend	2
Manchester	3
Norwich	3
Pentonville	5
Reading	2
Rochester	185
Wandsworth	10
Winchester	4
Wormwood Scrubs	14
Others	12
Total	528

Table 3: Persons recorded as being in detention[1] solely under Immigration Act powers, by nationality, as at 30 September 1997

Nationality	*Total Detainees*
Albania	7
Algeria	69
Angola	9
Bangladesh	24
Bulgaria	8
China	41
Columbia	13

Table 3: Persons recorded as being in detention[1] solely under Immigration Act powers, by nationality, as at 30 September 1997

Nationality	*Total Detainees*
Cyprus	14
Ecuador	7
Egypt	4
France	4
Gambia	14
Ghana	51
Greece	3
India	144
Iran	7
Israel	3
Ivory Coast	2
Jamaica	33
Kenya	14
Lebanon	6
Liberia	7
Libya	3
Malaysia	2
Morocco	6
Netherlands	3
Nigeria	129
Pakistan	70
Poland	9
Romania	9
Sierra Leone	2
Slovakia	4
Somalia	7
South Africa	6
Spain	2
Sri Lanka	17
St. Lucia	2
Sudan	4
Tanzania	5
Tunisia	3
Turkey	32
Uganda	3
USA	3
Former USSR	14
Venezuela	2
Former Yugoslavia	10
Democratic Republic of Congo	10
Zimbabwe	2
Stateless[2] and Nationality Doubtful	8
Other	59
Total	910

[1] Excluding persons detained in police cells.
[2] Excluding Palestine and Hong Kong stateless persons.

Correspondence

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Spelthorne dated 19 August relating to immigration issues raised by Mr. L. J. Pope of Shepperton. [15635]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I shall be writing to the hon. Member shortly, further to the reply sent on 30 October by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley).

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will give a substantive reply to the hon. Member's letters of 8 August 1997 and 17 October 1997 concerning the case of Shaukat Hayat, ref. DO 14448. [15862]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have written to my hon. Friend.

Huntingdon Life Sciences Laboratory

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on what date Huntingdon Life Sciences Laboratory is due to have its Animal Procedures Licence reviewed; if he will list the improvements required to prevent the licence form being revoked; and if he will make a statement. [15303]

Mr. George Howarth: The 16 conditions which the establishment had to meet before an application for a new Certificate of Designation could be considered were listed on 27 October in a reply to a question from the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock), *Official Report*, column 744. These conditions have been met and a new Certificate of Designation was granted on 29 September. The previous Certificate has been revoked.

Polling Stations (Disabled Access)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures his Department is taking to ensure that polling stations are accessible to a disabled person wishing to vote independently. [15477]

Mr. George Howarth: District and London Borough Councils are statutorily required to designate as polling places, so far as is reasonable and practicable, only places which are accessible to the disabled. Acting returning officers may apply to the Home Office and Scottish Office for grants towards the cost of providing temporary ramps and specially adapted polling screens to make polling stations accessible for those disabled voters who wish to vote in person. There is no limit on the number of applications which they may make for grant assistance. The Government are also considering the report "Polls Apart 2" published by SCOPE to see what further advice might be provided to acting returning officers.

Group 4

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Home Office Ministers, officials and Prison Service staff have taken paid employment with Group 4 Securitas after leaving his Department; how many of those employees were formerly responsible for overseeing, managing or inspecting contracts for private prisons; and if he will make a statement. [14466]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* Group 4 Prison and Court Services Limited have employed 20 former Prison Service employees. All were previously governor grades. Two had worked on private sector contracts whilst in the Prison Service.

Two governor grades are currently awaiting clearance from the Cabinet Office to commence employment with Group 4.

Information in respect of the employment of other officials and former Home Office Ministers is not available.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* his Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other greenhouse gases; if he will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved in the most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate he has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 2010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15537]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the United Kingdom's progress in implementing its programmes for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward to 2020 what the current programme is expected to achieve.

Emergency Communications Working Party

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the purpose of the ad hoc working party on emergency communications; who attends its meetings; how often it meets; on what dates it has met since 1993; when it was established; and if the papers of the working party are made available to the public. [15533]

Mr. George Howarth: The ad hoc working party on emergency communications (AWPEC) first met in 1985. It provides a forum for the exchange of information on emergency communications between the Home Office, other home departments and local authorities. It has met in March and September 1993, April and October 1994, April and December 1995, July 1996 and February 1997. The working party proceedings have not been made available to the public.

EU Conventions

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 July, *Official Report*, columns *74–6*, relating to two conventions of the European Community concerning extradition between its member states additional to those extant, by what means and on what dates each convention received parliamentary scrutiny; what consultation Ministers held with other bodies and persons affected by each convention; what notice was given to the public of the drafts of each convention; by what means the conventions will be ratified; when he expects to introduce legislation to amend the Extradition Act 1989; and what plans he has to publish explanatory memoranda prior to that date. [15566]

Mr. Michael: The right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), the previous Home Secretary, wrote to the Chairmen of the Scrutiny Committees on 3 March 1995 about the Convention on Simplified Extradition Procedure, enclosing a copy of the draft Council Act, a copy of the draft Convention and an Explanatory Note. He wrote to the Chairmen of the Scrutiny Committees on 3 April 1996 about the Convention Relating to Extradition Between Member States of the European Union enclosing a copy of the draft Convention, the draft Council Act and an Explanatory Note. He wrote again to the Chairman of the Select Committee on the European Communities on 7 May 1996. A further letter was sent to the Chairman of

Sub-Committee E, House of Lords, on 25 June 1996 in response to comments received by that Committee from Liberty, Justice and Fair Trials Abroad.

Government consultation was carried out at official level with interested Whitehall Departments. During the course of negotiations, European Union conventions remain confidential between member states. Each member state is required to complete its own internal procedures to provide for ratification. In the case of the United Kingdom, this will require primary legislation to amend the Extradition Act 1989. I am not in a position to announce when this legislation might be introduced.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list those Private Finance Initiative contracts entered into by his Department which transfer *(a)* volume risk, *(b)* risk of a return lower than one tied to movements in the retail prices index and *(c)* risk associated with ownership of the capital asset after the contract period; and if he will make a statement. [15593]

Mr. Straw: The following Private Finance Initiative contracts entered into by my Department transfer:

(a) volume risk:

Police National (telecommunications) Network

Prison PABX system

Immigration Caseworking project

United Kingdom Passport Agency passport processing contracts

Secure Training Centre, Cookham Wood

Coldingley Prison Industries Workshop

(b) risk of a return lower than one tied to movements in the retail price index:

Her Majesty's Prison Altcourse

Her Majesty's Prison Parc

Her Majesty's Prison Lowcham Grange

Secure Training Centre, Cookham Wood

Police National (telecommunications) Network

Immigration Caseworking project

United Kingdom Passport Agency passport processing contracts

Prison PABX system

Gatwick Immigration Detention facilities

Coldingley Prison Industries Workshop

(c) risk associated with ownership of the capital asset after the contract period:

Police National (telecommunications) Network

Immigration Caseworking project

United Kingdom Passport Agency passport processing contracts

Prison PABX system

Gatwick Immigration Detention facilities

Coldingley Prison Industries Workshop

All Home Office contracts are signed with value for money in mind.

Transfer of volume risk is impractical for contracts for prison facilities, as the client has control over the level of business. In such cases, risk is transferred by payment in relation to the contractor's liability to ensure that contractually specified facilities are made available to the demanding contractual timetable and that the availability of the service is maintained at a high level thereafter.

Payments to contractors may fall below movements in retail price levels if service quality is below specified standards.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what capital assets his Department will acquire under signed Private Finance Initiative contracts; what is the value of those assets; if, in each case, his auditors have provided an opinion that the asset will be recognised by the private sector contractor for accounting purposes; and if he will make a statement. [15601]

Mr. Straw: My Department will obtain services, not assets, under the duration of signed Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts. Design, Construct, Manage and Finance prisons (Altcourse, Parc and Lowdham Grange) and the Secure Training Centre for young offenders (Cookham Wood) will automatically become the Department's assets at no capital cost at the end of the PFI contracts in 25 and 15 years respectively. The Home Office has an option to acquire assets of the Immigration Caseworking project, and of the United Kingdom Passport Agency's passport processing contracts, at the end of the initial contract, on terms specified in the contracts. Any decision by the Home Office on whether to take up the options will depend on circumstances at the time.

It is not for the Department's auditors, the National Audit Office, to provide an opinion on whether assets will be recognised by the private sector for accounting purposes.

Telephones

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the access overload control scheme was established; what is its aim; how many categories there are in the scheme; how many mobile phone companies are subject to the scheme; which agencies or Government Departments are authorised to put the scheme into practice; and how many times the scheme has been put into practice since it was established. [15535]

Mr. George Howarth: The access overload scheme was first established in November 1989. Its aim is to ensure that in an emergency, essential users at the scene of an incident will have priority access to cellular radio networks which might otherwise be congested by non-essential users.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the purpose of the Government telephone preference scheme; when it was established; how many categories there are in the scheme; how these categories are defined; and how many times the scheme has been put into practice since 1967. [15534]

Mr. George Howarth: The purpose of the Government telephone preference scheme (GTPS) is to provide assured access for essential users in an emergency, when there may be a heavy load placed on the public telephone network, or the network itself may have been damaged. It was established in the late 1950s when there was a threat of massive nuclear war destroying significant parts of the national infrastructure.

There are three categories in the scheme, the first category being that of essential users such as the emergency services or government response teams. The second category is public call boxes and some payphones, and the third is the general public.

Records prior to 1987 are no longer available.

Since 1987, the preference scheme was activated by British Telecom as follows:

August 1987: Hungerford

October 1987: South-east England

January 1890: Southern England

December 1990: Midlands

February 1993: Welford upon Avon

June 1993: Chadford.

There are two categories in the scheme. First, public access in ten classes of equal status and, secondly, essential user access in three classes.

The Police Incident Commander has the authority to request the invocation of the scheme or exceptionally, the Cabinet Office, in consultation with the lead Government Department for the incident.

The scheme has been invoked on three occasions at Aintree, Crewe and Gatwick, all in April 1997.

Prisons (Health Care)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison establishments in England and Wales have one or more trained health care managers on their staff; and what plans he has to increase the number of staff trained in health care management. [13196]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 30 October 1997]:* Information is not collected centrally on the management qualifications of staff with managerial responsibility for the delivery of health care. All nurse qualified health care staff and doctors will have received some training in health care management, as part of their professional training.

The Prison Service has an active education and training policy for health care staff, supported through central funds. Governors are encouraged to give priority to management training, particularly in relation to management National Vocational Qualifications for nurses and health care staff in managerial posts.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many health care managers working within the Prison Service have National Health Service experience; and what proportion of health care managers within the service this figure represents. [14508]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 November 1997]:* Information is not collected centrally in the form requested. However, data from 122 establishments indicate that on 31 March 1997, 42 health care managers were registered nurses and, therefore, would have had National Health Service experience. This figure represents 34 per cent. of health care managers in those establishments.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the provision of false information to the immigration authorities with a view to obtaining political asylum or British citizenship; and if deportation orders against people providing such information carry rights of appeal. [14289]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: If false information were supplied in support of an application for asylum, this might have a bearing on the credibility of the applicant but would need to be considered as part of the totality of the evidence in determining whether the criteria in the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees were met. If it came to light after a grant of asylum that information relevant to the grant had been given falsely, the decision would need to be re-assessed in the light of the totality of the evidence taking account of the new facts.

Under legislation, all refused asylum seekers have a right of appeal before any removal to a country where they claim to fear persecution.

As to British citizenship, it is an offence, contrary to section 46 of the British Nationality Act 1981, to make any false statement for the purpose of procuring anything to be done or not to be done under that Act. Where the Secretary of State is misled as to the applicant's identity, the grant of citizenship may be treated as a nullity.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in 1996 *(a)* what was the total cost to the Government of supporting political asylum seekers, *(b)* how many of them were held in detention and how many subsequently deported and *(c)* how many illegal immigrants were deported; and what are the figures for the current year to date. [14231]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information regarding the direct cost to Central Government of supporting asylum seekers is given below. This relates to persons seeking asylum on political or other grounds of persecution. I regret that information about the other indirect costs to Central or Local Government is not available, such as the costs involved in providing medical treatment, education, housing and social work for asylum seekers.

The estimated cost to the Department of Social Security of support for asylum seekers in 1996 was £300 million.

This information is based on the February, May, August and November 1996 Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, and the May 1996 Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Management Information System. Information on the receipt of other Social Security benefits is based solely on those asylum seekers also claiming Income Support, as asylum seekers cannot be identified from other data sources.

The Department of Health has contributed to the costs of supporting those asylum seekers not eligible for Department for Social Security benefits, by providing three special grants to local authorities, which totalled £12.7 million in 1996–97. These grants were:

The Persons from Abroad with Children grant (PFACG) for asylum seeking families—£4.1 million;

The Asylum Seekers Accommodation grant (ASAG) for adults without children–£5.6 million;

The Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children grant (UASC)—£3 million.

Reliable information on the historical flow of persons placed into detention, and of those who were subsequently deported, can be obtained only through examination of individual case records. I regret that the information requested is, therefore, available only at disproportionate cost. However, as at 11 December 1996, the number of asylum seekers held in detention, solely under the powers contained in Schedule 2 or 3 of the Immigration Act 1971, was 754; the equivalent figure as at 30 September 1997 was 772.

The provisional figure for the number of persons subject to enforcement action (i.e. served with illegal entry notices or where deportation proceedings had been initiated) removed from the United Kingdom between 1 January 1997 and 30 September 1997 is 4,949. This includes voluntary/supervised departures made after enforcement action had been initiated. The figure covers asylum and non-asylum enforcement cases but excludes persons removed as a result of port refusal procedures. Equivalent information for 1996 can be found in table 7.1 of "Control of Immigration: Statistics, United Kingdom, 1996", (Cm 3737). Copies of this publication are available in the Library.

Remand Prisoners

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of prisoners on remand who are mentally ill; and if he will make a statement. [13721]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* Research published last year by the Institute of Psychiatry following a survey of the prevalence of mental disorder among the remand prison population of England and Wales for the Prison Service considered that 66 per cent. of the adult males, 53 per cent. of the young men and 77 per cent. of the women could be diagnosed as suffering from some form of mental disorder, including harmful or dependent substance misuse.

Equal Opportunities

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will provide a breakdown of *(a)* the numbers and *(b)* the percentages of employees in the Immigration and Nationality Department according to (i) gender and (ii) ethnic origin. [14978]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) collects data on the ethnic origin of its staff on a confidential, self declaration and voluntary basis. Details of the breakdown of the ethnic origin and gender of staff in the Directorate is as follows:

	White	*Black*	*Asian*	*Other ethnic origin*	*Not provided*	*Total*	*Number of ethnic staff as percentage*
Male	2,066	81	147	37	441	2,772	9.56
Female	2,017	168	355	31	314	2,885	19.20
Total	4,083	249	502	68	755	5,657	14.48

SCOTLAND

Health Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list, by health care provider, for each of the last four years, the number of contracts each health authority had in place, indicating how many of these had been referred for arbitration within the NHS region; and how many were left unsigned by *(a)* the provider and *(b)* the purchaser at the end of the year to which they applied, and, for 1997–98, by the end of October 1997. [14612]

Mr. Galbraith: Information on the numbers and status of contracts in place in the NHS in Scotland in the level of detail requested is not collected centrally. No contract disputes have been referred to The Scottish Office for formal arbitration in the last four years.

Sir Michael Spicer: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the level of per capita spending on health services in Scotland in the most recent year for which figures are available. [14920]

Mr. Galbraith: Provisional figures indicate that in 1996–97, the level of per capita spending on health services in Scotland was £860.

Sleep Laboratory

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the funding of the Scottish National Sleep Laboratory in Edinburgh. [14418]

Mr. Galbraith *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* I understand that Health Boards and The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh NHS Trust are in discussion about funding for the Sleep Laboratory in Edinburgh which is a matter primarily for them.

Monitor Consultancy

Mr. MacShane: to ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* the nature and value of contracts his Department has entered into and *(b)* discussions Ministers or officials have held with the Monitor Consultancy since 1990. [14949]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* The Scottish Office and associated agencies have no record of any contracts or discussions with the Monitor consultancy since 1990.

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to the oral Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development, *Official Report*, 5 November, column 332, if he will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in his Department. [15497]

Mr. Dewar: I refer to the answer which the Prime Minister has given today. All procurement decisions in my Department are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

Community Councils

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) what plans he has to encourage local authorities to increase the level of grant to community councils; [15440]

(2) what has been the level of funding for the Association of Scottish Community Councils for the years 1993 to 1997; what is the projected funding for the year 1997–98; and how many community councils in Scotland are members of the association; [15439]

(3) what plans he has to encourage the provision of training for community councillors, with special reference to planning and licensing issues. [15441]

Mr. Chisholm: Level of grant and other assistance to individual community councils is a matter for local authorities' discretion under Section 55 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. While the Government recognise the value of effective, adequately resourced community councils, they also recognise that local authorities have many competing calls on their available resources and are accountable to their local electorate for their decisions on spending. My right hon. Friend therefore has no plans to intervene in local authorities' consideration of spending priorities involving community councils.

At a national level, the Scottish Office first awarded grant to the Association of Scottish Community Councils in 1996–97, to the sum of £36,000. Grant proposed for 1997–98 is £37,000. The purpose of the grant is to help the Association develop staff support, run a national office base, and produce a quarterly newsletter. Grant was initially envisaged for three years; grant each year depends on the association meeting relevant targets agreed with the Scottish Office. I understand that 470 community councils are members of the association, although its newsletter is sent to member and non-member community councils alike.

I understand that training is one of the services that the association aims to facilitate. Local authorities also have the discretion to provide training services to community councils under Section 55 of the 1973 Act. In addition, the Scottish Office has granted £27,000 to Planning Aid Scotland over the last three years to train community councillors.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* his Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other greenhouse gases; if he will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved inthe most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate he has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 2010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15541]

Mr. Chisholm: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the UK's progress in implementing its programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward what the current programme is expected to achieve to 2020.

Overseas Travel

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his estimate of the expenditure by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its non-departmental public bodies on overseas travel for (i) 1980–81, (ii) 1987–88, (iii) 1990–91, (iv) 1991–92, (v) 1992–93, (iv) 1993–94, (vii) 1994–95, (viii) 1995–96, (ix) 1996–97 and (x) 1 May to 30 September 1997; and if he will provide a breakdown to show (1) air fares and (2) other expenditure relating to overseas travel. [15247]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 11 November 1997]:* Information on overseas travel in the Scottish Office and its agencies is not held separately. Air fares and other expenditure relating to overseas travel cannot be disaggregated from total expenditure on travel and accommodation in the Scottish Office and its agencies without disproportionate costs in staff time.

Information on non-departmental bodies is not held centrally.

Farmed Salmon

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the Scottish Office will make a decision on whether to license the drugs cypermethrin and ivermectin for the general treatment of sea lice in farmed salmon. [14897]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 12 November 1997]:* Authorisation of veterinary medicines such as cypermethrin and ivermectin is a matter for the Veterinary Medicines Directorate.

Requisite discharge consents enabling the use of ivermectin have been issued by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in a number of cases. Further use of this substance has been requested and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is currently considering whether to exercise his power of call-in under the Control of Pollution Act 1974.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the financial impact of the lack of a suitable treatment for sea lice on the Scottish salmon farming industry; and what assessment he has made of the welfare implications of sea lice eating farmed salmon. [14803]

Mr. Chisholm *[holding answer 12 November 1997]:* The cost to the industry of dealing with the problem of sea lice has been estimated to be of the order of £20 million to £30 million per annum. It is a major issue and one which, for welfare as well as economic reasons, requires a variety of solutions, not just medicinal ones. My officials continue to discuss the matter with industry representatives.

HEALTH

Leg Amputations

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many leg amputations caused by gangrene there were in the United Kingdom between 1977 and 1997; and what is the average cost of such operations to the National Health Service. [12740]

Mr. Boateng: The information available on the number of leg amputations carried out in National Health Service hospitals in England where gangrene is mentioned as a primary or secondary cause, is set out in the table.

England

	1989–90	*1990–91*	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*
A. Total number of leg amputations (OPCS4R:X09)	6,403	6,504	6,813	6,842	6,890	6,679
B. Leg amputations with a primary diagnosis of gangrene (ICD9:785.5) (included in A above)	761	714	667	738	684	553
C. Leg amputations with gangrene mentioned as a secondary diagnosis (ICD9:785.5) included in A above)	1,268	1,141	1,260	1,249	1,286	1,265

Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics.

Currently the cost of this procedure is not collected centrally and therefore an average cost is unavailable.

Questions relating to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are matters for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland respectively.

Paracetamol

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research he has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated into safe paracetamol. [14281]

Ms Jowell: We have not commissioned any research into paracetamol. Paracetamol taken at the recommended dosage is safe. However, paracetamol is available in combination with the antidote methionine where there is a danger of overdose. Data on the safety of products containing paracetamol and products containing paracetamol with methionine have been evaluated by the Licensing Authority and its expert advisory bodies when considering applications for marketing authorisations submitted to the Medicines Control Agency (MCA). Following grant of a marketing authorisation, the MCA continues to monitor safety for all authorised medicinal products, including those containing paracetamol and paracetamol with methionine.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) of 20 May, *Official Report*, column 498, on the subject of multiple sclerosis, when the report on the way in which health authorities are implementing his Department's Guidelines will be completed; and what consultations his Department undertook with the Multiple Sclerosis Society relating to the implementation of the guidelines. [14471]

Mr. Boateng: Officials have collected details about how health authorities are implementing the guidance. The Department has kept in touch with the Multiple Sclerosis Society about the implementation of the guidance over the past year.

Social Services

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the report, "Removing Barriers", published by the Local Government Association; and if he will make a statement. [14585]

Mr. Boateng: We welcome the Local Government Association report, "Removing Barriers: the Case for a New Deal for Social Services and Social Security". Both my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Health and for Social Security are ensuring that it is taken into account in looking at the interface between the social security and social services systems as part of our comprehensive spending reviews.

Myodil

Mr. Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons Glaxo was granted a licence for Myodil; and what assessment he has made of overseas evidence that the drug is unsafe. [14608]

Ms Jowell: Myodil has been in use since the 1940s and was granted a Product Licence of Right (PLR), when the Medicines Act 1968 came into force. PLRs were reviewed by the Committee on Review of Medicines, which issued advice to the Licensing Authority. Applications for reviewed PLRs were assessed on the basis of the safety, quality and efficacy of the product. A reviewed product licence for Myodil was granted in 1987. However, Myodil was taken off the market by Glaxo for commercial reasons later in 1987. The safety of all licensed medicines is kept under continuous review by the Committee on Safety of Medicines and Medicines Control Agency. Safety data from all sources, including overseas, are included in this process.

Press Releases (Internet)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health within what time period his Department's press releases are placed on the Central Office of Information Internet services; and for what reasons press releases are not placed on the Internet at the same time as they are issued to the media. [14593]

Ms Jowell: All the Department's press releases, other than operational notes solely for the attention of the media, are placed on the Central Office of Information's (COI) government press release Internet site at approximately 10.30 am one working day after their issue to the media. COI will shortly be improving their Internet site, as a consequence of which press releases will be available to the public on the same day that they are issued to the media. At present, all Government press releases are updated on the Internet the next working day, in large batches manually. The individual tasked with this then has other duties to perform at COI. If press releases were placed on the Internet immediately at the time of issue, one dedicated person would have to be deployed for this task. COI have commissioned software specifically designed for them to enable Press Releases to be updated and placed on the Internet at regular intervals during the day. This will achieve the same day service.

Cannabis

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research his Department has commissioned on the use of cannabis and its safety; what the cost of this research was; and where and when it will be published. [14992]

Mr. Boateng: Department of Health officials, including professionals, are keeping the available research into the risks and medical use of cannabis under review. Since 1996, expenditure on this activity through the Policy Research Programme has amounted to £10,705. The Department has not recently commissioned basic research in this area. Misuse of drugs legislation allows for research involving cannabis under Home Office licence. Any proposed clinical trial would have to be submitted to the Medicines Control Agency in accordance with the Medicines Act 1968. Any application for a licence or a certificate, or both, would be considered in the normal way.

Meningitis (Southampton)

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the extent of the outbreak of meningitis in Southampton; how many persons *(a)* have died and *(b)* are under observation; if vaccine is available for all students at (i) Southampton Institute and (ii) Southampton University; and if he will make a statement. [14729]

Ms Jowell: There have been six confirmed cases of meningitis in the Southampton area since 1 October. Three patients have died; three have recovered, and been discharged from hospital. One patient is under observation for suspected meningitis.

At Southampton University vaccine has been given to all first year students, all staff and all those resident or working in the halls of residence. The University has now made vaccine available to all students. A programme of vaccination for all first year students and all students living in halls of residence at Southampton Institute started on 10 November and is expected to be completed by 14 November.

Renal Services (Lancashire and Cumbria)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the provision of renal services in the Lancashire and Cumbria health districts. [14766]

Mr. Boateng: We have no plans at this time to review renal services in the Lancashire and Cumbria health districts. However, my hon. Friend may wish to refer to the National Renal Services Review, completed and published in 1996, which reported on reconfigurations of renal services throughout England.

Accident and Emergency Services

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the future of accident and emergency services in Gloucestershire. [14906]

Mr. Boateng: The future pattern of accident and emergency services in Gloucestershire is a matter for Gloucestershire Health Authority. The health authority is currently undertaking public consultation on "Health Gloucestershire: A five year strategy for health and health services"; the strategy does not propose any changes to the current pattern of accident and emergency services in the health authority area at this stage.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has issued on the average size of population in the catchment area of a general hospital needed to sustain a full accident and emergency service. [15503]

Mr. Boateng: Health authorities and National Health Service trusts should provide an accident and emergency service which meets the needs of local people. The size of the population served by accident and emergency departments will therefore vary according to local circumstances.

There is evidence that seriously ill and injured patients do better in larger departments where a high proportion of care is offered by consultant staff, with access to backup from a range of specialist departments. In May 1995 the Department of Health published the "*Review of Literature on Accident and Emergency Departments and Clinical Outcomes* copies of which have been placed in the Library."

Advocacy Services (Children)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advocacy services are available to children on a national basis; what support they receive from public funds; what national standards of operation apply to them; and what monitoring his Department undertakes of such services. [15039]

Mr. Boateng: Many local authorities and voluntary organisations provide advocacy services to children. This year the Department of Health has contributed a total of £93,163 to help some voluntary organisations provide information and advice to children and young people, and act as advocates for them. This includes recent funding to assist the development of national standards of advocacy.

These are unlikely to be implemented fully for a further two years. Advocacy services are not required to be inspected by local authority Inspection units; and the Department of Health has not undertaken any monitoring via its Social Services Inspectorate.

NHS Purchasing

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he next intends to market-test the central purchasing function of the NHS. [15083]

Mr. Milburn: There are no plans to market test the central purchasing function of the National Health Service Supplies Authority.

Cystic Fibrosis

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to improve the care and services available for cystic fibrosis sufferers and their families. [15053]

Ms Jowell: Over the past 20 years or more there has been progressive improvement in the care of people with cystic fibrosis, reflected in the increasing numbers who survive into adulthood. A follow up study by the Clinical Standards Advisory Group of access to, and availability of, specialist services, completed in 1996, found that access to such services for patients with cystic fibrosis had been improved in most regions since the original study three years earlier. The follow-up report was sent to health authorities and trusts in December 1996 with a request that they consider carefully the suggestions for action, and in particular the need for continuing innovation in contracting. We shall continue to work with health professionals and all those with an interest to improve the care of people with cystic fibrosis and their quality of life.

Chiropody and Podiatry

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the guidelines that are issued and health needs assessments that health authorities undertake to ensure the availability of chiropody and podiatry services to meet the needs of the local population. [15364]

Mr. Boateng: A joint Department of Health/National Health Service task force conducted a review of NHS chiropody services in 1994. Its report, "Feet First", provides guidance to the NHS on planning and delivering chiropody services. As with other health care services, local health authorities determine the quantity and scope of the chiropody services they are able to provide for their residents. They have to take into account the total resources available to them and bear in mind local priorities and circumstances.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to safeguard the provision of chiropody on the NHS. [15431]

Mr. Boateng: Chiropody is one of the range of National Health Service services provided to meet the needs of the population. The quantity and scope of chiropody services is determined by individual health authorities and general practitioner fundholders in the light of local priorities and resources.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the number of *(a)* face-to-face contacts and *(b)* initial contacts, with chiropody and podiatry staff for (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1995–96 and (iii) 1994–95. [15363]

Mr. Boateng: Information for 1996–97 is not yet available. The numbers of reported patient contacts with the chiropody service in the last three years in England are as follows.

Thousands

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*
Total face-to-face contacts[1]	8,005	8,270	8,328
Initial face-to-face contacts[2]	1,006	975	951

[1] A contact is any face-to-face meeting between a member of chiropody staff and an individual patient or patient's proxy, where treatment or advice is given.

[2] An initial contact is the first in an episode of care with a service provider. An episode of care may be initiated by a referral to the chiropody staff from a hospital, general practitioner or other health service professional.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the NHS expenditure on NHS chiropody and podiatry in *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1995–96 and *(c)* 1994–95. [15370]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is contained in the table:

Total expenditure on community chiropody services England—1994–95 to 1996–97

	Chiropody £000s
1994–95	90,122
1995–96	96,674
1996–97	99,647

Note:
Figures for 1996–97 are provisional.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the budget for each health authority or health board allocated for chiropody and podiatry services in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1996–97 and *(c)* 1995–96. [15369]

Mr. Boateng: Health authorities are not normally allocated budgets for particular services or individual client groups. Information on local spending decisions or particular services is not collected centrally. It is for authorities to make their own decisions about the level of resources required in each case on the basis of an assessment of local needs and priorities, and taking into account the national priorities set by Government.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list those health authorities which have notified his Department of *(a)* reductions or increases in chiropody services in 1996–97 relative to 1995–96 and *(b)* planned reductions or increases in chiropody services in 1998–99. [15371]

Mr. Boateng: Health authorities are not required to notify the Department of changes in activity in particular services. Although the Department wishes to see health authorities and general practitioner fundholders provide the full range of National Health Service services including chiropody, detailed planning decisions on levels of provision are taken locally according to the needs of the population served.

Lariam

Ms Corston: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what factors were taken into account by the Malaria Advisory Committee when recently recommending that travellers to any part of the world for two weeks or less should not take Mefloquine (Lariam); and what assessment he had made of the need for guidance for those travelling for more than two weeks but less than six months. [15450]

Ms Jowell: The "Guidelines for the prevention of malaria in travellers from the United Kingdom", which were published in September this year, give full details of the issues considered and references used by the group of experts who compiled them. The guidelines are comprehensive and cover periods of travel of varying lengths, including advice for travel more than two weeks but less than six months. The guidelines advise that the prophylactic regimen of choice will depend on a variety of factors such as the level of risk from malaria which exists in the country to be visited, the length of stay, the activities the traveller will be engaging in, the traveller's medical history, the effectiveness of each prophylactic regimen and the potential adverse effects of the regimen. The guidelines do recommend mefloquine for trips shorter than two weeks if the risk of highly chloroquine resistant malaria is high.

Organ Donation

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health pursuant to the letter of 7 October from the Minister of State (POH/6/5437/13), what was the outcome of the meeting with Robert Johnson and Dr. N. J. Evans, about opt-out organ donation. [14470]

Mr. Boateng: Ministers have met with a number of organisations in the transplant field, including Mr. Robert Johnson, transplant surgeon and President of the British Transplantation Society, and Dr. N. J. Evans, Chairman of the United Kingdom Transplant Support Service Authority about opt-out organ donation. These meetings have been most helpful and have contributed to our current consideration of options for the way forward in transplantation.

Thalidomide

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* evaluated into the use of thalidomide in the treatment of (i) leprosy, (ii) tuberculosis and (iii) AIDS-related wasting and mouth ulcers; and if he will make a statement. [15009]

Ms Jowell: Thalidomide is not used in the United Kingdom in the treatment of tuberculosis. It has an important place in the management of some patients with leprosy as set out in the Departments "Memorandum on Leprosy". The Department has considered studies carried out on the use of thalidomide in the treatment of leprosy but has not undertaken research in this area. Copies of the latest edition of the Memorandum, issued in August of this year, are available in the Library. Thalidomide has been used for treating AIDS related wasting and mouth ulcers but the Department has not undertaken or evaluated any research on this topic. As thalidomide is not licensed for such treatments it is only available on a "named patient basis" and the use of the drug is a matter for clinicians and patients to discuss and agree according to individual circumstances.

Antioxidants

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* evaluated into the risk posed to cancer patients by the consumption of antioxidants; and if he will make a statement. [15010]

Mr. Boateng: No research has been undertaken or evaluated by this Department into the risk posed to cancer patients by the consumption of antioxidants. The Medical Research Council, the main agency through which the Government supports medical and clinical research, provided support in 1995–96 for the following projects in the general area of antioxidants and the development of cancer, although these projects addressed the question of the anticarcinogenic effect of antioxidants rather than the effect of antioxidants on cancer once established:

Mechanisms of modulation of carincogenesis by antioxidants: genetic control of the anticarcinogenic response in mice (MRC Toxicology Unit, Leicester);

Prospective markers of antioxidant status in relation to future cardiovascular disease, lung and stomach cancer (MRC Dunn Nutrition Unit in Cambridge). This study was funded by the Department of Health's Policy Research Programme;

the European Prospective investigation of Cancer (EPIC) which is a prospective study to identify dietary factors and dietary profiles which modify the risk for a range of chronic diseases including cancer. This takes the form of both direct support to the MRC Biostatistics Unit and grant support to participants;

a human study at the MRC Dunn Nutrition Unit of an individual's lifetime nutritional habits and their relative risk of developing cancers of the breast and bowel.

Xenotransplantation

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to establish a National Standing Committee to oversee the development of xenotransplantation; and if he will make a statement. [15011]

Mr. Boateng: The establishment of the United Kingdom Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Authority was announced on 16 January 1997 in response to the recommendations of the Advisory Group on the Ethics of Xenotransplantation. Its membership was announced on 14 March 1997. I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave him on 27 October at columns *764–65*.

Gene Therapy and Artificial Organs

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase investment in research into the development and application of gene therapy and artificial organs; and if he will make a statement. [15012]

Ms Jowell: Research into these areas is being conducted internationally. In some cases industry is in the lead. Within the United Kingdom, the Government will continue to encourage research relevant to these areas according to the scientific quality of proposals and to competing priorities. Much of this research will continue to be taken forward by the Research Councils.

Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what conditions or restrictions are placed on the Clinical Director of the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust in relation to his contract with the Nuffield Hospital; [15832]

(2) when the existing contract for the holder of Clinical Director of the Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS trust expires. [15831]

Mr. Milburn: Trusts are free to set terms and conditions of employment as they think fit. Those of Basildon and Thurrock Hospitals Trust (B&THT) are in line with the Whitley Council. We are advised that the Medical Director of the B&THT has no contract with the Nuffield Hospital.

Each of the executive directors of the B&THT, including the medical director, are employed on rolling 18-month contracts; they have as such no termination date. The executive directors' contracts are subject to regular review by the trust's remuneration committee.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Tuition Fees

18. **Mr. Gorrie:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for tuition fees for higher education. [14339]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State plans to require most new entrants to full-time undergraduate courses from autumn 1998 to contribute up to a maximum of £1,000 a year to tuition fees, depending on their parents', spouses' or own income. Tuition will continue to be free for students from low-income families.

Examination Assessors

19. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what checks are made on the competence of assessors of A-level and GCSE scripts in England and Wales. [14340]

Ms Estelle Morris: Responsibility for ensuring that A-level and GCSE examiners maintain standards from year to year and across syllabuses lies with the GCE and GCSE Examining Boards, in collaboration with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales. The Boards follow detailed Codes of Practice, agreed annually with the QCA and ACCAC. New examiners are appointed only if they have the relevant qualifications and experience, and the performance of existing examiners is closely monitored.

Out-of-School Learning and Homework Centres

20. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made on the development of out-of-school learning and homework centres. [14341]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have made significant progress. Fifty Summer Literacy Schools ran as a pilot scheme last summer and 500 will be supported next year. Study support centres will open shortly at a number of Premier League football clubs. We will consult shortly on a National Framework for Motivating Pupils outside the Classroom and will continue to work with colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on proposals for Lottery funding to be available for out-of-school hours activities.

Further and Higher Education (Enrolment)

21. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the number of students entering further and higher education. [14343]

Dr. Howells: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government are setting a target for an extra 500,000 people to enter further and higher education by the year 2002.

22. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the numbers of students entering higher education from neighbourhoods currently with the lowest participation rates; and if he will make a statement. [14344]

Dr. Howells: The Government are committed to increasing and widening access to higher education. We will want to follow up the Dearing Report's recommendations for widening access and we are currently analysing the responses to the consultation on the Report. We will make an announcement in due course.

Class Sizes

23. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects that every child aged between five and seven years will be taught in a class of 30 pupils or fewer. [14346]

Mr. Byers: We shall honour the pledge given before the election and shall have reduced class sizes to 30 pupils or fewer for every five, six and seven-year-old by the end of this Parliament.

Nursery Education

24. **Mr. Tipping:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what new plans he has for the inspection service for establishments caring for the under fives. [14347]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Department, jointly with the Department of Health, will be consulting early in the new year on establishing a more uniform regulatory and inspection regime for early years settings providing day care and nursery education.

Environmental Education

25. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding he plans to allocate to environmental education. [14348]

Ms Estelle Morris: Decisions as to what funds to allocate to environmental eduction are for individual schools. Schools manage their own budgets under Local Management of Schools. Also, they can use the funds we have made available under the School Effectiveness Grant, which totals £130.1 million in 1997–98.

Grant-maintained Schools

26. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations his Department has received about problems created by the admission policies of grant-maintained schools; and if he will make a statement. [14349]

Mr. Byers: Responses to our White Paper "Excellence in Schools" demonstrated very strong support for our aim of ensuring that all admission authorities in an area work together effectively, for the benefit of all parents. The new Code of Practice will set out national guidelines to apply to all LEA and school admission authorities.

New Deal

27. **Mr. Alan Johnson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the response of employers to the new deal for young unemployed people. [14350]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate).

28. **Charlotte Atkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if young people entering the Gateway phase of the new deal will be able to gain some work experience without losing benefits entitlement. [14351]

Mr. Andrew Smith: People claiming the Jobseeker's Allowance are able to benefit from work experience as part of an employment or training programme without losing benefit entitlement. This includes young people in the Gateway phase of the New Deal.

Literacy

29. **Ms Beverley Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his Department's literacy strategy. [14352]

Mr. Byers: Our National Literacy Strategy is an ambitious programme for achieving our target of 80 per cent. of 11-year-olds reaching the expected standard for their age in English by 2002. The strategy will guarantee every primary schools teach the opportunity to learn about the most effective methods of teaching literacy, so that all pupils can achieve their full potential. We shall be investing £50 million next year in training for teachers and in providing books for schools.

School Applications

30. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the subject of improving the organisation of applications to schools in England. [14353]

Mr. Byers: Our proposals for school admissions have stressed the importance of the development, through local admissions forums, of helpful and timely information for parents and of common timetables for applications. This has been widely welcomed.

"Excellence in Schools"

31. **Mr. Dismore:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he has responded to the consultation on the White Paper "Excellence in Schools". [14354]

Mr. Byers: We received approximately 8,000 responses to the full and summary versions of the White Paper and are considering them all carefully. In response, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has already announced a strengthening of the proposed new framework for the organisation of schools, designed to enable schools to remain firmly focused on raising standards. These changes illustrate this Government's commitment to genuine consultation. Further policy announcements in response to the White Paper will be made as appropriate.

National Grid for Learning

32. **Mr. Derek Twigg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his plans for the national grid for learning. [14355]

Dr. Howells: I would refer my hon. Friend to the consultation paper "Connecting the Learning Society" which was launched by the Prime Minister on Tuesday 7 October. This document is available in the Library.

Early Years Education

33. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the impact of his new formula for resource allocation for early years education. [14356]

Ms Estelle Morris: A copy of the guidance recently issued to local education authorities setting out the arrangements for early years education has been placed in the Library. Funds will be provided to support the Government's policy of providing an education place for all four-year-olds whose parents want it. Details of the funding formula and its impact for individual local authorities will be announced in due course as part of the local government finance settlement.

School Governors

34. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he is taking to promote a greater awareness of the contribution of school governors. [14357]

Mr. Byers: Our White Paper "Excellence in Schools" makes it clear that school governors have a special role as partners in the education service. They provide a vital link between the school and the community, and we propose to strengthen that link by increasing the number of parent governors. We are most grateful to the 300,000 school governors in England who give their time so generously. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has personally written twice to every governing body emphasising the vital role we hope they will play in improving school performance. We are also making available specific training support to help governing bodies in their main task of raising standards in our schools.

Tennis

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Eduation and Employment (1) if he will estimate the number of tennis courts which have been sold off during the last 10 years by schools and sixth form colleges for housing re-development schemes; [15152]

(2) if he will estimate the number of *(a)* schools and *(b)* sixth form colleges with tennis courts within their grounds, indicating the total number of such courts in (i) 1987 and (ii) the latest year for which figures are available. [15153]

Mr. Byers: This information is not collected centrally.

Higher Education Funding

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what amount each educational institution funded by the Higher Education Funding Council received from *(a)* the HEFC, *(b)* the research councils and British Academy and *(c)* sources other than the pubic sector for the last year figures are available specifying the amount under *(d)* received from the institutions endowment. [14626]

Dr. Howells: Information on the funding allocated to institutions by the Higher Education Funding Council for England for the academic year 1997–98 is contained in a circular (reference HEFCE Circular 6/97), a copy of which is in the Library. Higher education institutions also receive fees paid via LEAs for students holding mandatory awards.

The latest information on the funding allocated to institutions by the research councils is contained in a number of tables, copies of which have today been placed in the Library. Comparable information on the funding allocated by the British Academy is not available.

We do not collect information on income received by institutions from sources other than public funds. The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 specifically debars Government, through the Higher Education Funding Council for England, form having regard to private income in distributing public funds.

Schools Funding

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the average level of grant per child received by each authority for the provision of primary and secondary school education. [15028]

Mr. Byers: Revenue Support Grant for local authorities is provided through the standard spending assessment formula, but it is up to each authority to decide how to fund primary and secondary school education. The following table sets out for 1997–98 the primary and secondary SSA per pupil figures for each local education authority.

LEA	*1997–98 primary SSA per pupil* £	*1997–98 secondary SSA per pupil* £
City of London	3,017	7,245
Camden	2,975	3,740
Greenwich	2,810	3,679
Hackney	3,179	4,330
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,955	3,827
Islington	2,999	4,026
Kensington and Chelsea	2,711	3,630
Lambeth	3,107	4,403
Lewisham	2,936	3,889
Southwark	3,029	4,029
Tower Hamlets	3,217	4,261
Wandsworth	2,779	3,670
Westminster	2,789	3,578
Barking and Dagenham	2,429	3,213
Barnet	2,300	2,975
Bexley	2,206	2,888
Brent	2,648	3,578
Bromley	2,180	2,839
Croydon	2,361	3,125
Ealing	2,480	3,330
Enfield	2,399	3,131
Haringey	2,762	3,721
Harrow	2,267	3,000
Havering	2,176	2,853
Hillingdon	2,262	2,968
Hounslow	2,440	3,154
Kingston upon Thames	2,168	2,825
Merton	2,314	3,030
Newham	2,752	3,618
Redbridge	2,323	3,036
Richmond upon Thames	2,126	2,728
Sutton	2,219	2,866
Waltham Forst	2,563	3,399
Birmingham	2,240	2,960
Coventry	2,123	2,786
Dudley	1,954	2,559
Sandwell	2,139	2,808
Solihull	1,961	2,540
Walsall	2,071	2,701
Wolverhampton	2,150	2,848
Knowsley	2,381	3,177
Liverpool	2,295	3,022
St. Helens	2,045	2,695
Sefton	2,038	2,662
Wirral	2,100	2,763
Bolton	2,042	2,674
Bury	1,972	2,558
Manchester	2,359	3,138
Oldham	2,102	2,732
Rochdale	2,114	2,806
Salford	2,139	2,814
Stockport	1,939	2,547
Tameside	2,025	2,648
Trafford	1,993	2,603
Wigan	1,969	2,572
Barnsley	2,038	2,687
Doncaster	2,116	2,782
Rotherham	2,037	2,655
Sheffield	2,068	2,725
Bradford	2,151	2,845
Calderdale	2,050	2,689
Kirklees	2,066	2,718
Leeds	2,041	2,680
Wakefield	1,988	2,603
Gateshead	2,074	2,736
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,171	2,846
North Tyneside	2,015	2,664
South Tyneside	2,121	2,780

LEA	1997–98 primary SSA per pupil £	1997–98 secondary SSA per pupil £
Sunderland	2,089	2,744
Isles of Scilly	3,576	4,701
Bath and North East Somerset	1,933	2,483
Bristol	2,093	2,784
North Somerset	1,942	2,552
South Gloucestershire	1,902	2,496
Hartlepool	2,098	2,754
Middlesbrough	2,199	2,935
Redcar and Cleveland	2,105	2,739
Stockton on Tees	2,066	2,707
Kingston upon Hull	2,159	2,834
East Riding of Yorkshire	1,961	2,561
North East Lincolnshire	2,077	2,728
North Lincolnshire	2,039	2,673
North Yorkshire	2,006	2,602
York	1,946	2,565
Bedfordshire	2,055	2,696
Luton	2,244	2,958
Buckinghamshire	2,064	2,712
Milton Keynes	2,133	2,813
Derbyshire	1,952	2,564
Derby	2,085	2,747
Dorset	1,963	2,565
Poole	1,943	2,539
Bournemouth	2,033	2,650
Durham	2,043	2,685
Darlington	2,037	2,683
East Sussex	2,094	2,753
Brighton and Hove	2,173	2,847
Hampshire	2,007	2,630
Portsmouth	2,163	2,831
Southampton	2,179	2,888
Leicestershire	1,905	2,504
Leicester	2,208	2,898
Rutland	1,942	2,466
Staffordshire	1,935	2,533
Stoke on Trent	2,043	2,692
Wiltshire	1,988	2,602
Thamesdown	1,979	2,600
Berkshire	2,103	2,759
Cambridgeshire	2,019	2,650
Cheshire	1,976	2,581
Cornwall	2,057	2,698
Cumbria	2,022	2,644
Devon	2,031	2,663
Essex	2,119	2,781
Gloucestershire	1,977	2,584
Hereford and Worcester	1,978	2,591
Hertfordshire	2,135	2,788
Isle of Wight Council	2,166	2,840
Kent	2,103	2,758
Lancashire	2,046	2,686
Lincolnshire	2,041	2,675
Norfolk	2,042	2,675
Northamptonshire	1,999	2,620
Northumberland	2,016	2,638
Nottinghamshire	2,052	2,695
Oxfordshire	2,047	2,669
Shropshire	2,027	2,650
Somerset	1,996	2,620
Suffolk	1,983	2,599
Surrey	2,109	2,763
Warwickshire	1,960	2,572
West Sussex	2,043	2,674
England	2,130	2,782

Dance and Drama

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to respond to the Dearing Committee recommendations on the funding of students of dance and drama; and if he will make a statement. [15835]

Dr. Howells: Our response of 23 July to the Dearing Inquiry report made it clear that we would review what arrangements might be put in place for providing financial support for dance and drama students when the current scheme expires. This work is being taken forward by officials from this Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his Department has lead responsibility for the funding of students of dance and drama. [15836]

Dr. Howells: The Department for Education and Employment funds dance and drama courses in public further and higher education institutions through grants to the FEFC and HEFCE. Some students on these courses will be eligible for support through mandatory and discretionary awards and student loans. In addition, the Department will be contribution a minimum of £9 million of new funds to the interim bursary scheme over the four academic years the scheme will run.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the funding of training for dance and drama; and if he will make a statement. [15834]

Dr. Howells: The Secretary of State for Education and Employment has received a number of representations on the subject from various interested bodies.

Church Schools

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received from the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church on the relationship between church schools and local education authorities; and if he will make a statement. [14332]

Mr. Byers: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson).

Performing Arts Students (Grants)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the discretionary grant system for higher and further education with particular reference to students of the performing arts; and if he will make a statement. [15833]

Dr. Howells: We intend to abolish discretionary awards under section 1(6) and section 2 of the Education Act 1962, amended. We are now considering with LEAs and others what new arrangements for post-16 discretionary support might be put in place, including arrangements for students of the performing arts.

National Curriculum Tests

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to improve results in the National Curriculum tests for seven, 11 and 14-year-olds in the coming year. [14319]

Mr. Byers: On 7 July we published a White Paper, "Excellence in Schools", which set out our agenda for raising standards in schools. A copy of the White Paper is available in the Library.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 14 November 1997

PRIME MINISTER

Campaigns

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Prime Minister when he last met representatives of campaigns to *(a)* ban tobacco advertising, *(b)* restore the links between earnings and the level of basic pensions, *(c)* end laboratory procedures on living creatures, *(d)* oppose student tuition fees, *(e)* oppose a reduction in lone parent benefits and *(f)* support a ban on hunting with dogs. [15950]

The Prime Minister: All Government Ministers have meetings with a wide range of organisations and individuals.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Student Debt

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if *(a)* Student Loans Company debt and *(b)* student overdraft debt can be offset against a claimant's assets. [16139]

Mr. Keith Bradley: When the amount of a claimant's capital is calculated in the income-related benefits, the value of a capital asset is reduced by the amount of any debt secured on it. No similar arrangement applies to unsecured debts of any type.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent representations she has received concerning the operation of the CSA. [14225]

Mr. Keith Bradley: In the last six months approximately 500 representations about child support issues have been received from hon. Members and around 900 representations from members of the public, voluntary bodies and other organisations.

We recognise that, despite considerable improvements in the performance of the Child Support Agency, too many representations about the operation of the child support scheme still relate to poor service. We are determined to ensure that absent parents meet their responsibilities and pay the maintenance they owe and we are looking closely at all aspects of the Agency to ensure that it delivers a modern, efficient and effective service to all its clients.

New Deal

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many single parents in Warrington, North have benefited from the New Deal programme to date. [15693]

Mr. Keith Bradley: Modernising the Social Security system is a key priority of the Government. Our objective is to reduce poverty and welfare dependency and to promote work incentives. Our welfare to work programme will provide opportunities for lone parents to move into work.

The operational responsibility for the New Deal for Lone Parents is a matter for Peter Mathison, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Helen Jones, dated 13 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many single parents in Warrington North have benefited from the New Deal programme to date.

The information is not available in the format requested. Statistics are collated by each New Deal for Lone Parent service area and not by Parliamentary Constituencies. The Benefits Agency North Cheshire district, which comprises offices at Warrington and Widnes, is one such area.

The New Deal for Lone Parent service offers advice and help with jobsearch, training, childcare and benefits, as part of the Welfare to Work programme, to create a package of back-to-work help for lone parents with school age children. Any lone parent whose youngest child is below school age can benefit from the service.

The New Deal for Lone Parents service has been available in North Cheshire since 21 July 1997 and by 31 October 1997, staff in Warrington had interviewed 233 lone parents, of whom 214 had agreed to participate in the programme and 50 had found work.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Benefits Agency

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which five areas were used for the pilot schemes in which lone mothers claiming income support were visited by Benefits Agency staff at home, when each scheme commenced; how many claimants have been visited in each of the five areas; what assessment she has made of the success of the pilot schemes; and what proposals she has for further schemes; [13975]

(2) if she will publish the interview questions asked by Benefits Agency staff when interviewing claimants at home; [13974]

(3) what training has been given to Benefits Agency staff to carry out tasks previously carried out by Child Support Agency staff. [13973]

Mr. Keith Bradley: The operation of the Benefits Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Mr. Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friends.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mrs. Maria Fyfe, dated 13 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions concerning the pilot schemes in which lone mothers claiming Income Support were visited by Benefits Agency (BA) staff at home.

The five sites used for the pilot schemes were Bristol, West Bromwich, Pontefract, Kirkcaldy and Norwich. As a control, and for comparison purposes, the sites were paired with offices of similar size and caseload which were following normal procedures.

Initially two pilot schemes were undertaken; phase 1 from 1 April 1997 to 30 April 1997 and phase 2 from 1 May 1997 and 30 May 1997. Phase 1 involved issuing a Maintenance Application Form (MAF) at the new claims visit and phase 2, issuing and completing the MAF.

250 visits were undertaken for each phase, and the numbers for each site are as follows:

Site	*Phase 1*	*Phase 2*
Bristol	60	49
West Bromwich	49	59
Pontefract	42	51
Kirkcaldy	40	28
Norwich	59	63
Total	250	250

The evaluation has shown an improved customer service by the Agencies as all issues are raised at the start of the claim. They have also shown a significant increase in the number of customers co-operating with the Child Support Agency (CSA) at the start of the claim, which will expedite the maintenance process.

The Department's programme for modernising service delivery aims to identify the scope for reducing overlaps and repetition of work between Agencies where they have clients in common. These pilots have demonstrated that lone parents are better served by the Department conducting business in this way.

A third pilot scheme was undertaken form 1 July 1997 to 26 September 1997, involving trained BA visiting staff also questioning customers about their reasons for claiming "Good Cause" where appropriate. Good cause is where the customer seeks to avoid being required to apply for child support maintenance on the grounds that there is a risk of harm or undue distress if the CSA should pursue the absent parent. The same areas were involved in this pilot with the addition of Chilterns, the results of which are currently being evaluated.

Following the successful results of the initial pilot schemes, it has been agreed that MAF issue and completion work should be transferred to the BA from April 1998. To fully consider the impact of this transfer of responsibility to BA, two sites are continuing with phase 2 of the pilot.

A specific list of the questions which the customers are asked when interviewed at home is not available. BA visiting officers are trained to ask the appropriate questions depending on the customers particular circumstances.

The BA staff who have been involved in these pilots have been fully trained in Child Support applications and in interviewing lone parents.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list *(a)* his Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other greenhouse gases; if he will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved in the most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate he has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 2010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15539]

Mr. Fisher: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the UK's progress in implementing its programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward what the current programme is expected to achieve to 2020.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Witnesses

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will review the legislative provision for a maximum daily allowance to witnesses for loss of earnings to ensure that those appearing as witnesses are not out of pocket as a result. [15280]

Mr. Hoon: The present provisions are intended to relieve hardship that may result from witnesses discharging their public duty by attending court to give evidence. I have no plans to change the present legislation. There is inevitably a tension between meeting the full costs of witnesses attending court and the limited public money available to do so. I believe the present provisions strike the right balance in recognising the discharge of a public duty and using limited public funds to best effect.

Amsterdam Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 27 October 1997, *Official Report*, column *650*, on the treaty of Amsterdam, which parts of that treaty provide for the United Kingdom to opt in or out of civil judicial co-operation measures; and what parliamentary procedure would be required for such decisions. [15032]

Mr. Hoon: The Protocol on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland has the effect that the adoption of proposed measures under Title IIIa of the EC Treaty, which includes (under Article 73m) civil judicial co-operation, will not apply to the United Kingdom or Ireland unless those countries choose to take part in the adoption and application of such measures. If the Government decided to take part in the adoption of any such measure or to accept an existing measure the usual parliamentary scrutiny procedure would apply.

Sports Clubs

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department in how many instances during the last 10 years a court has refused to renew a lease held by a sports club under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954; and for what reasons. [15149]

Mr. Hoon: The question concerns a matter which has been assigned to the Court Service under the terms of its framework document. I have therefore asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from M. D. Huebner to Mr. Edward Davey, dated 14 November 1997:

The Parliamentary Secretary of the Lord Chancellor's Department has asked me to reply to your question about the number of times courts have refused to renew sports clubs' leases.

The information requested is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

E-mail

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to ensure that e-mail between and within Government departments is assessed for historical significance and preserved for record purposes. [15166]

Mr. Hoon: The Question concerns a specific operational matter on which the Chief Executive of the Public Record Office is best placed to provide an answer and I have accordingly asked the Chief Executive to reply direct.

Letter from Sarah Tyacke to Mr. Gordon Prentice, dated 14 October 1997:

I have been asked by the Lord Chancellor's Parliamentary Secretary to reply for the Public Record Office to your question about the above.

E-mail created or received by Government Departments is covered by the Public Records Act. Departments are therefore under a statutory duty to make arrangements, under my guidance and supervision, for the selection of those records which ought to be preserved permanently and for their safekeeping.

Since 1995 the Public Record Office, supported by a cross-government Advisory Board, has been running an Electronic Records in Office Systems programme to give leadership across government in the management of electronic records, to ensure that such records of long term value are available for future access.

The programme surveys the current programme of electronic records by Departments and delivers advice and guidance on their management, selection and preservation. Two classes of electronic records have so far been transferred to the Public Record Office as pilots, to develop and test the new procedures required. A strategy has been developed to implement the software products supplied by the IT industry, and, in particular, to encourage products that aid the management and archiving of electronic records.

TREASURY

Ombudsmen

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the powers of the *(a)* banking and *(b)* building society ombudsmen. [15954]

Mrs. Liddell: Both ombudsmen investigate and adjudicate upon customer complaints within their terms of reference, and make awards where the complaint is upheld. The terms of reference of both schemes exclude purely commercial decisions, unless there is an allegation of maladministration.

HEALTH

Elderly Persons (Local Authority Care)

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the average rate of grant per head received by each local authority for the care of elderly persons. [15029]

Mr. Boateng: Revenue Support Grant is an unhypothecated grant which is distributed to local authorities on the basis of Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs). An SSA is the Government's assessment of the appropriate amount of revenue expenditure which would allow an authority to provide a standard level of service, consistent with the Government's view of the appropriate amount of revenue expenditure for all local authorities. SSAs are not binding on authorities, which are free to decide how much to spend on any service. All personal social services SSAs, including figures on a per capita basis, are listed in the "Local Government Finance Standard Spending Assessment Handbook 1997–98", copies of which are available in the Library.

Head Injuries (Children)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures are being taken to improve the treatment of children suffering from severe head injuries. [15482]

Mr. Boateng: Recent improvements in paediatric intensive care will help improve the treatment of children with severe head injuries at the acute stage. In addition we are strongly encouraging better collaboration between the various agencies involved in the provision of rehabilitation, special educational arrangements and social care for all disabled children, including those with head injury.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what liaison his Department has with the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Social Services to ensure that the wider community is more comprehensively informed about the problems suffered by children with severe head injuries. [15483]

Mr. Boateng: Officials from the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment meet regularly to discuss improving awareness of the needs of all children with disabilities encompassing those with severe head injuries. The Department of Health is also in regular contact with social services departments to discuss continuing social care needs and with the Department of Transport to publicise the need to reduce road traffic accidents which are one of the major causes of traumatic brain injury.

North Essex Health Authority

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will assess the effects of the change made in the capitation formula for the allocation of NHS money to North Essex health authority; [16051]

(2) what would be the 1998–99 allocation of NHS money to North Essex health authority using the formula employed for the current year; what would it be if the new formula was fully funded; and what is the actual allocation he has announced for 1998–99. [16052]

Mr. Milburn: The weighted capitation formula is used to set targets which then inform allocations. The formula does not determine allocations. These reflect our decisions on the speed at which health authorities are brought nearer to target through the distribution of growth. If a different formula had been used we might have distributed growth differently. It is therefore not meaningful to recalculate 1998–99 allocations hypothetically.

If the 1997–98 formula had been applied to North Essex health authority's target this would have been 2.86 per cent. greater.

North Essex health authority's 1998–99 general allocation for HCHS is £370,351,000, some 97.73 per cent. of its weighted capitation target of £378,944,000. This represents a 5.01 per cent. cash increase.

Chiropody and Podiatry

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what are the staffing and personnel figures for all NHS grades and whole-time equivalent staff for chiropody and podiarty for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1995–96 and *(c)* 1994–95. [15365]

Mr. Boateng: Information is not available in precisely the form requested. Such information that is available is shown in the tables.

National Health Service Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS) professions allied to medicine, staff working in the chiropody area of work in England at September 1994

	whole-time equivalents	*headcount*
All chiropody staff	3,020	3,600
Chiropodist	80	90
Senior Chiropodist Grade 2	1,320	1,600
Chief Chiropodist Grade 1	670	770
Chief Chiropodist Grade 4	190	200
Chief Chiropodist Grade 3	180	190
Chief Chiropodist Grade 2	30	40
District Chief Chiropodist Grade 2	90	90
District Chief Chiropodist Grade 1	20	20
District Senior Chief Chiropodist	[1]—	[1]—
Teaching Grades:		
Teacher	[1]—	[1]—
Senior Teacher	10	10
Principal Grade 1	[1]—	[1]—
Principal (Annual intake of 24 or more)	[1]—	[1]—
Others	40	60
Footcare Assistant	380	470
Others	[1]—	[1]—

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest ten whole-time equivalents. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.

[1] 5 or less and greater than zero.

Source:

Department of Health annual non-medical workforce census.

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS) scientific, therapeutic and technical staff working in the chiropody area of work in England at 30 September for each year

	1995		*1996*	
	wte	*headcount*	*wte*	*headcount*
All chiropody staff	3,120	3,780	3,190	3,820
Manager	70	70	80	80
Therapist	2,600	3,140	2,650	3,160

NHS Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS) scientific, therapeutic and technical staff working in the chiropody area of work in England at 30 September for each year

	1995		*1996*	
	wte	*headcount*	*wte*	*headcount*
Tutor	10	20	20	20
Student/Trainee	[1]—	[1]—	[2]—	[2]—
Helper/Assistant	430	540	440	550

Notes:

Due to the introduction of new occupation codes in 1995, figures for 1995 and 1996 are not directly comparable with figures for earlier years. Figures are rounded to the nearest ten whole-time equivalents. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts.

[1] five or less and greater than zero.

[2] zero.

Source:

Department of Health non-medical workforce census.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Corporate Community Involvement

Mrs. Ballard: To ask the President of the Board of Trade what research her Department has conducted into company giving or corporate community involvement, with particular reference to gender balance. [15203]

Mr. Michael: I have been asked to reply.

The Research and Statistics Division of the Home Office is conducting a series of Local Voluntary Activity Surveys (LOVAS) in order to measure levels of voluntary activity across England. These surveys will include some information about corporate community involvement.

In addition, three of the organisations to which the Home Office, through its Voluntary and Community Unit, gives core funding—Business in the Community, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Directory of Social Change—are currently carrying out research into various aspects of company giving and corporate community involvement.

SCOTLAND

Social Services Funding

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) if he will list for each social services board his estimate of the additional funding which will be made available this winter; [14591]

(2) if he will list by health authority the dates on which social services departments within each health authority were invited to make applications for additional funding to assist with managing pressures over this winter, indicating the deadlines they were given for completing their funding applications. [14596]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government have provided an additional £25 million to Health Boards in Scotland on a weighted capitation basis to assist with managing winter pressures. It is for Health Boards to work together with other local agencies, including Social Work Departments, to ensure robust plans are in place to cope with increases in demand over the winter. They must determine the most effective use of the additional resources.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if his Department will pay the tuition fee for the final year of a four year university course for EU students studying at Scottish universities. [15080]

Mr. Wilson: Eligible EU students undertaking full-time courses of higher education at institutions in Scotland will receive assistance towards their tuition costs on the same basis as Scottish domiciled students.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Government Property Lawyers

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Attorney-General if he will make a statement about the Quinquennial Review of the Government Property Lawyers. [16664]

The Attorney-General: In accordance with the Government's Policy on periodic reviews of executive agencies the Treasury Solicitor will set in hand this month a thorough review of the Government Property Lawyers. The remit for this review will be as follows:

To carry out a review of the Government Property Lawyers, in accordance with Cabinet Office (OPS) guidance and agreed timetable by

(a) evaluating performance of the Agency since launch;

(b) thoroughly re-examining the case for: abolition, privatisation, contracting out, market testing, rationalisation or merger with other areas of government, and agency or NDPB status, with a view to reaching a future status which will provide the most appropriate and cost effective way of carrying out the functions so as to deliver best value for money and service; and

(c) making recommendations accordingly to the Treasury Solicitor on which he can advise the Attorney-General.

In order to ensure that all options are considered fully, comments from interested parties will be welcome. Comments should be sent by 5 December to the following address:

Mr. C. A. Woolley
Treasury Solicitor's Department
Room 253
Queen Anne's Chambers
28 Broadway
London SW1H 9JS.

The results of the review will be announced in the Spring.

Fair Trade (Coffee and Tea)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Attorney-General, pursuant to the oral Statement by the Secretary of State for International Development on 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, column 332, if he will instruct officials to serve coffee and tea furnished by suppliers who adhere to fair trade standards in his Department. [15493]

The Attorney-General: I refer to the answer given yesterday to my hon. Friend by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, *Official Report*, column *617*. All procurement decisions in my Departments are based on the Government's policy of value for money.

WALES

Health Authority Deficits

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will list the *(a)* actual deficits and *(b)* projected deficits of each health authority as a percentage of their budget for the last three years; [14274]

(2) if he will list the *(a)* actual deficits and *(b)* projected deficits of each health (i) trust and (ii) authority as a percentage of their budgets for the last three years. [14275]

Mr. Win Griffiths *[holding answer 4 November 1997]:* The following tables provide the information requested. The Trust figures are based on audited accounts for 1995–96 and 1996–97 and on estimated operational planning figures for 1997–98. The Health Authority figures for 1995–96 and 1996–97 are taken from audited accounts. Those for 1997–98 were derived from monitoring returns and relate to authorities' current financial plans.

Health authority	*1995–96 Deficit as a percentage of income*	*1996–97 Deficit as a percentage of income*	*1997–98 Deficit as a percentage of income*
Clwyd DHA	–0.65	n/a	n/a
Gwynedd DHA	–0.78	n/a	n/a
Mid Glamorgan DHA	–0.32	n/a	n/a
West Glamorgan DHA	–0.24	n/a	n/a
Bro Taf HA	n/a	—	–1.7
Dyfed Powys HA	n/a	–0.54	–2.0
Gwent HA	n/a	–0.39	–0.4
Morgannwg HA	n/a	—	–0.8
North Wales HA	n/a	–1.04	–2.4

Figures based on data provided by health authorities' monitoring returns.

n/a=relates to Health Authority reorganisation.

NHS trust	*1995–96 Deficit as percentage of income*	*1996–97 Deficit as percentage of income*	*1997–98 Deficit as percentage of income*[1]
Carmarthen and District	—	–0.59	–5.12
Ceredigion and Mid Wales	–0.66	—	–6.40
East Glamorgan	—	—	–0.67
Gwent Community	–1.57	—	—
Llanelli Dinefwr	–0.50	—	–3.40
Morriston Hospital	–0.39	–3.42	–3.50
North Glamorgan	n/a	–3.27	–3.41
Pembrokeshire	—	–0.50	n/a
Pembrokeshire and Derwen	n/a	n/a	–0.29
Powys	—	—	–2.48
South East Wales	–4.95	—	—
Ambulance University Dental Hospital	—	—	–0.96
University Hospital of Wales	–1.20	—	—

[1] 1997–98 figures based on Operational Plan estimates as submitted by Trusts.
n/a=not applicable as Trust was not/is not in existence.

Hospitals (Fire Safety)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which hospitals in Wales do not meet the current fire regulations. [15288]

Mr. Win Griffiths: Firecode Policy and Principles 1994 requires Chief Executives of NHS Trusts to endorse an annual certificate of Statutory and Firecode compliance and put in place work programmes which will satisfactorily address all fire certification and Firecode requirements by April 2000. All Trusts have this in place.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list *(a)* his Department's policies and initiatives designed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and *(b)* the departmental policies and initiatives designed to reduce other greenhouse gases; if he will estimate for each the annual reduction in tonnage of greenhouse gas emissions achieved in the most recent year for which figures are available compared to those for 1990; and what estimate he has made of further reductions, or increases, predicted for 2000 and 2010, assuming continuation of current policies. [15549]

Mr. Win Griffiths: I refer the hon. Member to the United Kingdom's Second Report under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which was published in February 1997. It reports the UK's progress on implementing its programme for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and gives a projection of what the programme is expected to deliver by 2000. The report projects forward what the current programme is expected to achieve to 2020.

University Tuition Fees

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if the Welsh Office plans to fund all four years of study by students from Wales at Scottish Universities; how many students from Wales are currently in the fourth year of a degree course at a Scottish University; and what assessment he has made of the cost of funding this fourth year. [16092]

Mr. Hain: There were around 100 students from Wales in the fourth year of first degree courses at Scottish institutions in 1996–97 (the latest year for which figures are available). As in England, students from lower-income families will have the whole of their tuition fees paid for them in the fourth as in the previous three years, whilst others may have part of their fees paid, depending on an assessment of their parents', spouses' or own income.

We estimate that the extra of meeting the contributions payable by students from Wales towards fees in the fourth year of first degree courses at Scottish institutions would be some £45,000.

DEFENCE

Equipment Sales

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the equipment formerly used by the United Kingdom armed forces which has been sold overseas since 1995 stating in each case the date sold, the type of equipment sold and the recipient country. [15016]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Disposal Sales Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Malcolm Westgate to Mr. John McDonnell, dated 14 November 1997:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about sales of surplus Armed Forces equipments overseas, as this matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Disposal Sales Agency.

Attached at Annex A is a list of complete major surplus defence equipments sold to overseas Governments since the beginning of 1995, either directly or through UK companies.

Thee have also been sales of substantially incomplete equipments, associated spares and relatively minor material to overseas Governments, either directly or through UK companies, but it would require disproportionate effort to identify them all. However, I would be glad to expand on the list given at Annex A so far as I can without breaching customer confidentiality.

All the sales listed were subject to the usual stringent export control procedures required in the sale of all defence equipments overseas.

Sales of major surplus defence equipments overseas since 1995

Type of equipment sold	*Recipient country*	*Date of sale*
Leander Frigate (ex-RN)	India	February 1995
M109 Self-propelled Guns (ex-Army)	Austria	February 1996
Vehicles (ex-Army)	Malta	July 1996
Type 22 Frigates, Batch 1 (ex-RN)	Brazil	August 1996
River Class Minesweepers (ex-RN)	Brazil	August 1996
Light Armoured Recovery Vehicles (ex-Army)	Austria	March 1997

Sales of major surplus defence equipments overseas since 1995

Type of equipment sold	*Recipient country*	*Date of sale*
Wessex Helicopters (ex-RAF)	Uruguay	June 1997
105 mm Light Guns (ex-Army)	Botswana	June 1997
Vehicles (ex-Army)	Malta	August 1997
Peacock Class Hong-Kong Patrol Craft (ex-RN)	Philippines	August 1997
105 mm Light Guns (ex-Army)	Eire	September 1997

Training and Research (Animals)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* training and *(b)* research undertaken by the armed forces which involves the use of animals with in each case the (i) species, (ii) numbers and (iii) procedures concerned; and if he will make a statement. [14234]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 November 1997]:* This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA). I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 14 November 1997:

I have been asked to respond to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence on animal training and research by the armed forces as the majority of this work falls within my area of responsibility as Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA).

DERA does not undertake any training with the armed forces which involves the use of animals. Specifically, medical officers and the other clinical staff are not trained in technical practises using live animals. The Defence Animal Centre at Melton Mowbray does, however, train animals for military duties. In the 1996/97 financial year, a total of 370 dogs were trained for search and patrol duties, and 60 horses were trained for ceremonial duties.

DERA carries out a number of research programmes involving the use of animals and aimed at providing the armed forces with safe and effective protection against specific operational hazards. During 1996, a total of 11221 animals were used. The species were: guinea pigs, hamsters, marmosets, mice, pigs, rabbits, rats, Rhesus monkeys, sheep and goats. To list all of the procedures would involve a disproportionate amount of effort.

One of these programmes involves specifically clinical staff from the armed forces. A small number of medical officers from the Defence Medical Services are seconded to CBD to work with DERA staff on research into the management of battle injury and trauma. During 1997, the species and numbers of live animals used up until the end of October in this research programme were: pigs—46; sheep—14; rabbits—8.

All work at DERA involving the use of animals is carried out strictly in accordance with the requirements of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986.

Chinook Helicopter

Kate Hoey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will order a fresh inquiry into the Chinook helicopter crash of 5 June 1994 at the Mull of Kintyre. [15438]

Mr. Spellar: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and my Ministerial colleagues have been fully briefed on the conduct and findings of the RAF Inquiry. We accept, as did the previous Administration, that the Inquiry had properly concluded, on all the evidence, that the pilots had broken safety rules and in that regard had been grossly negligent.

New Deal

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role his Department is playing in the New Deal for the young unemployed. [15638]

Dr. Reid: My Department is keen to play a full part in the Government's New Deal initiative, and a number of exploratory meetings have taken place with officials from the Department for Education and Employment on how best the MOD can contribute. My Department intends to concentrate mainly on the Gateway stage of the Scheme. We are, at the same time, encouraging those who will be involved in providing training for these young people to include self-development courses and briefings on the Armed Forces.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Closed Circuit Television

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance his Department issues to local organisations which intend to submit a bid in the CCTV challenge round planned for next year. [15757]

Mr. Michael: We are currently considering, linked to our review of existing expenditure programmes, how to encourage the appropriate use of closed circuit television (CCTV) in the fight against crime. If we decide to run another round of the CCTV challenge competition in 1998–99, bidding guidance will be made available to interested parties. An announcement on the future of the competition will be made soon.

Police Manpower (Wales)

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the current manpower levels of each Welsh police force; and if he will make a statement. [15818]

Mr. Michael: The latest date for which figures are available is 31 March 1997. The information requested is set out in the table.

Police force	*Number of officers at 31 March 1997*
Dyfed–Powys	[1]1,004.5
Gwent	1,243
North Wales	1,369
South Wales	[1]2,975.9
Total	[1]6,592.4

The 1994 Police and Magistrates' Courts Act made it a matter for individual chief officers and their police authorities to determine the number of police officers in their area on the basis of the resources available to them.

[1] The fractional figures account for part-timers and job shares.

Prison Workshops (Garth and Wymott)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has for the future provision and administration of the prison workshops at HM prisons Garth and Wymott. [15743]

Ms Quin: There are no plans to change the arrangements for the provision and administration of the prison workshops at Garth and Wymott. Wymott is part of the Prison Service Workshop Expansion Programme, which aims to maximise employment for prisoners, extend workshop hours and maximise the revenue from the sale of goods and services to local businesses.

New Prisons

Mr. Liwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many new prisons are currently being planned; and if he will make a statement. [15745]

Ms Quin: The Prison Service plan to open seven new prisons over the next three years.

Three new prisons will open by the end of February 1998. These are Her Majesty's Prison Parc in Bridgend, Her Majesty's Prison Altcourse in Liverpool and Her Majesty's Prison Lowdham Grange in Nottinghamshire.

A further four prisons are planned to open from mid 1999–2000. These include an 800 place multi-functional male prison at Agecroft near Salford, a 400 place male young offender institution located on the site of the former Her Majesty's Prison Pucklechurch near Bristol and a 600 place male adult training prison at Marchington near Stafford. A fourth prison, at a site to be confirmed, is planned to open in mid-2000.

Prison (Colchester)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which site in the Colchester area was investigated about two years ago for a new prison; and which further site is currently being assessed. [15027]

Ms Quin: The site investigated about two years ago was the former Moler Works in the Hythe area to the south of Colchester. It was immediately rejected as unsuitable.

The site which is currently being assessed is not yet on the open market and it would be inappropriate to identify it at this stage. If the Prison Service considers that it offers potential, and there is a real prospect of its being used for prison purposes, I will write to the hon. Member.

Animals (Scientific Procedures)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) of 6 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *284*, if he will list the numbers and nature of experiments carried out in 1996 where animals were used to test and develop means of protecting United Kingdom service personnel against terrorist and battlefield weapons. [15952]

Mr. George Howarth: This information is not collected centrally by the Home Office. Licensees are not required in their annual statistical returns to specify whether procedures are for the purpose of protecting or treating service personnel. Military medicine is not a separate category of permissible work under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The numbers of animals in question may be recorded in the 1996 annual statistics variously under the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease; the advance of biological science; the modification of physiological function; and protection of the environment.

Armley Gaol (Suicides)

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many suicides have taken place at Armley gaol, Leeds, over the last 10 years. [16089]

Ms Quin: The number of deaths at Leeds prison over the last ten years where the Coroner's verdict was suicide is given.

Suicides at Leeds prison: 1988 to 1996

Year	*Number*
1988	4
1989	2
1990	0
1991	1
1992	1
1993	2
1994	0
1995	1
1996	1

There have been two self-inflicted deaths at Leeds prison as at 13 November 1997. The Coroner's inquests into both have yet to be held.

Criminal Injuries Compensation

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to review the figures set out in the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme Tariff; and if he will make a statement; [15320]

(2) what plans he has to revise the terms and operation of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [15321]

Mr. Michael: Public expenditure on victims of crime is currently under review as part of the Government's wider comprehensive spending review launched earlier this year. Amongst other things, the review is looking at expenditure on the criminal injuries compensation scheme, as well as on other victims' programmes. The Government will consider whether changes to the compensation scheme might be appropriate in the light of the findings of the spending review.

EU Conventions

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to place before Parliament proposals for approval of the draft conventions on *(i)* driver disqualification and *(ii)* mutual assistance on criminal matters; and what steps have been taken to consult other bodies or interests concerned in respect of each convention. [15572]

Ms Quin: It is not possible to give an estimate of when negotiations on the draft Convention on driving disqualifications will be completed, as a number of issues remain to be resolved. Home Office and Department of Transport officials have been collaborating in work on the draft Convention, which will be deposited for scrutiny shortly.

Under the European Union Action Plan to combat organised crime, approved by the Amsterdam Council, the target date for completion of the draft Convention on mutual legal assistance is not later than mid-1998. The Home Office regularly consults other departments and agencies on the draft Convention. The text was deposited for scrutiny on 3 October 1996. A substantially revised and expanded version was sent to the scrutiny committees on 24 July this year and a further updated text was sent to them on 28 October.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *74–6*, concerning the operation of a convention concerning corruption and officials of the European Union and member states; and when and by what means parliamentary approval was given to the convention. [15574]

Ms Quin: The Convention was agreed by the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 26 May 1997. It has not yet been ratified by any member state.

Prior to ratification by the United Kingdom, the Convention will be laid before Parliament for at least 21 sitting days in accordance with the Ponsonby Rule. I regret that the answer I gave to my hon. Friend on 1 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *74–6*, incorrectly stated that no further Parliamentary proceedings are required in order to ratify the Convention. I apologise for that error.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *74–6*, in respect of the Fraud Convention of the European Community, when he expects to lay an Order under Section 78(3) of the Criminal Justice Act 1993 before each House of Parliament; and what subsequent procedure it will be subject to. [15568]

Ms Quin: We hope to lay an Order by the middle of 1998. This will put the United Kingdom in a position to ratify the Convention. At that point, the Convention will be laid before Parliament in accordance with the normal procedure.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *74–6*, when the Europol Convention acquired legal status in the United Kingdom; on what date the subsequent protocol giving optional powers to the European Court was placed *(a)* before the Government and *(b)* approved by Parliament; and where the text of the Protocol is publicly available. [15571]

Mr. Michael: The Europol Convention was signed in July 1995 and ratified by the United Kingdom on 10 December 1996. It will enter into force on the first day of the month following the expiry of a three month period after the last member state has ratified it.

The Protocol to the Convention concerning the Court of Justice of the European Communities was signed in July 1996, laid before Parliament on 11 November 1996 and ratified on 10 December 1996. The text of the Protocol was published as Command Paper Number 3465.

Eurostar

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps the Government are taking to ensure that the Eurostar route to and from the Continent is secure against misuse by illegal immigrants and those wishing to bring illegal drugs into the United Kingdom. [14205]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Foreign nationals travelling on Eurostar services are subject to examination by United Kingdom Immigration Officers. We liaise with French and Belgian authorities to ensure that this control is effective, and are currently examining with Eurostar and French authorities the issue of permanent document checks in Paris. The French authorities are assisting with random checks at the moment. These were introduced at the request of this Government because under the system we inherited there were no checks at all in Paris. Her Majesty's Customs and Excise operate checks for drugs on Eurostar passengers at Ashford and Waterloo terminals. These checks are based on intelligence, information and risk-testing analysis.

Prisons (Private Finance Initiative)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which of the contracts to *(a)* manage and *(b)* build and manage, prisons under the private finance initiative have been let to Group 4 Securitas or consortia including Group 4 Securitas; which of those contracts was awarded after competition in response to the lowest cost bid; and if he will make a statement. [13725]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 3 November 1997]:* Group 4 Securitas manages Her Majesty's Prison Wolds and Her Majesty's Prison Buckley Hall, and is part of the consortium awarded the contract to design, construct, manage and finance Her Majesty's Prison Altcourse under the private finance initiative. These contracts were decided on the basis of the bid and offered best value for money, having taken account of criteria relating to quality and confidence in deliverability.

Milipol

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if companies attending Milipol at Le Bourget in France on 24 to 27 November will receive any Government support. [14964]

Mrs. Roche: I have been asked to reply.

My Department will not be offering financial support under the Trade Fairs Support Scheme for companies attending Milipol. However, UK firms attending will, like other exporters, be able to obtain advice and information from their local Business Links in England, or from the appropriate Territorial Department in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Parades and Marches

Mr. Trimble: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much notice was given by Glasdrummond Band of its parade in Rostrevor on Sunday 2 November; and to whom such notice was given. [15161]

Mr. Ingram: Notice of the parade by Glasdrummond Band was given to the local police on the morning of 2 November 1997.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many parades took place in Northern Ireland from 1 April to 30 September. [15044]

Mr. Ingram: Between 1 April and 30 September of this year there were a total of 2,687 parades in Northern Ireland.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many applications were received for compensation in respect of damage to persons and property as a result of disturbances associated with marches and demonstrations during July; how many of these were approved; what were the applicable financial figures; how many were rejected; and how many have still to be determined. [15045]

Mr. Ingram: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Compensation Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Denis Stanley. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from D. A. Stanley to Mr. Eddie McGrady, dated 12 November 1997:

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has asked me to reply, on behalf of the Compensation Agency, to your recent Question regarding applications for compensation made in respect of damage to persons and property as a result of disturbances associated with marches and demonstrations during July.

The Agency does not identify separately claims which result from marches and demonstrations and therefore can only supply information in respect of all claims received for incidents during July:

	Criminal injury	*Criminal damage*
Claims received	1,327	979
Claims settled	3	8
Claims denied	5	10
Claims not yet decided	1,309	961
Compensation paid to date	£5,000	£7,163

In many of the cases not yet decided, full claim details are still awaited. The Agency's loss adjusters are endeavouring to collect these in respect of the criminal damage claims while, of course, interim payments, where appropriate, have been made. In the case of criminal injury claims, medical evidence and evidence in respect of financial loss are being pursued.

Health and Social Services

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what discussions were held in respect of the capitation funding system for health and social services boards; and what criteria governed its formulation. [15042]

Mr. Worthington: The Capitation Formula Review Group, which is an expert group comprising Departmental and Board officers held a range of meetings, and engaged in extensive work, including specific research on Northern Ireland data, before producing its recommendations on the way forward.

The Review Group worked to a specific set of criteria to ensure that the revised formula would:

- be based on sound methodology;
- be a fair and equitable method of allocating resources;
- be based primarily on the requirement to take account of the differing levels of need for health and personal social services between resident Board populations;
- be sensitive to Targeting Health and Social Need (THSN);
- be capable of amendment and further refinement as improvements take place in information sources and the knowledge based on resource allocation;
- be based on factors and/or weights which have a basis in evidence;
- focus on allocations to the total resident populations and should not constrain the development of a formula for allocating resources to GP Fundholders;
- address the inescapable cost differentials for urban-rural areas;
- as far as possible, take account of the impact of cross-border migration and other relevant population movements unless this is addressed by some other mechanism.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations she has received concerning the health and social services capitation review. [15043]

Mr. Worthington: There has been a range of responses from Boards, Trusts, Members of Parliament and District Councils along very clear lines. Those representing Board areas where it is proposed to reduce the capitation funding share oppose the Review Group's recommendations while those representing Boards areas where it is proposed to increase the capitation funding share support the recommendations.

I can confirm that the majority view is one of support for the recommended way forward.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the financial operations of each of the health and social services trusts in Northern Ireland. [15048]

Mr. Worthington: Various statutory provisions ensure that HSS Trusts in Northern Ireland manage and account for their financial activities in line with sound accounting practice and Government policy. Compliance by each of the Trusts is monitored and assessed by the HSS Executive through a number of mechanisms including financial returns, accounts and audit activity.

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what priority was accorded to *(a)* targeting social need and *(b)* policy appraisal and fair treatment initiatives in devising the formula for the capitation funding system for health and social services boards. [15051]

Mr. Worthington: The Group developing the capitation formula for the allocation of resources to Health and Social Services Boards assessed their proposals against the requirements of the targeting social need and policy appraisal and fair treatment initiatives and found their recommendations to be consistent therewith.

Homelessness

Mr. McGrady: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to amend legislative provision relating to the homeless in Northern Ireland. [15049]

Mr. Paul Murphy: None at present, but the matter is currently being reviewed.

De Lorean Motors

Mr. Soley: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on progress in the Government's civil action against Arthur Andersen and Co. in relation to De Lorean Motors. [16280]

Mr. Ingram: I am pleased to report that Government and the Arthur Andersen firms have agreed to settle all claims between them arising from the De Lorean case. After some 12 years of litigation both here and in the United States it was in the interests of both parties that the proceedings be brought to a conclusion.

I believe the terms agreed between the parties represent a fair disposal of the action. Details of the settlement will not be disclosed at this time because of on-going legal action in the United States, action in which Her Majesty's Government is not involved.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

A66

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the dualling of the A66. [15036]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked Mr. Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Nutt to Dr. Ashok Kumar, dated 14 November 1997:

As you know the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and Regions has asked Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about dualling of the A66. I am replying in Lawrie Haynes absence from the office.

We are aware of the local pressure for dualling the A66 between Scotch Corner and the M6 at Penrith.

The only A66 dualling scheme in the National Trunk Roads Programme is the £15m Temple Sowerby Bypass and Improvement at Winderwath, west of the Pennines. Work has also started to identify a number of smaller schemes to improve junctions and provide shorter lengths of dualling.

As you may be aware, the Government are undertaking a broad based strategic review of the whole Roads Programme. The objective of the review is to determine the role which roads should play in an integrated transport policy and to establish a forward investment programme for the trunk road network in England. A wide ranging public consultation exercise was launched in July and closes on 14 November. The conclusions of this review will be announced next year.

Ministers will consider the case for any further improvements to the A66 as part of this review, and will take account of local views.

Housing (East Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate she has made of the cost of bringing the housing stock in East Lancashire up to standard. [15517]

Mr. Raynsford: The Department has not made specific estimates of the cost of bringing the housing stock in East Lancashire up to standard and the only cost figures available are for the need for capital work to the council housing stock. These figures are provided by local authorities in the annual HIP round and are presented for East Lancashire.

Local authority estimates of the need for capital work to the council housing stock

Local authority	*Need for capital works to the council housing stock 1 April 1996* £
Pendle	4,585,000
Ribble Valley	6,689,000
Rossendale	46,641,000
Hyndburn	19,700,000
Burnley	32,611,000
Blackburn	81,965,000

Source:

Housing Investment Programme—HIP3 form.

Authorities do not supply estimates for the private sector or housing association stock within their area. The only related figures available are local authorities' estimates of the numbers of unfit dwellings and, for the housing association stock, dwellings in need of renovation. The reported estimates for 1 April 1996, the latest date for which figures are available, are given in the 1996 "HIP1 All Items Print", a copy of which is in the Library.

Sustainable Transport

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce and publish a central database of best practice in sustainable transport initiatives. [15647]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have no current plans to establish a central database, but my Department will continue to publicise and promote examples of best practice, for example through Ministerial speeches, and Departmental publications and guidance notes.

Some of this material can be found through the Press Notices available on the Department's Internet web site (http://www.coi.gov.uk/coi/depts/GTE/GTE.html).

Vehicle Sharing

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of shared vehicle arrangements in German cities. [15646]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Two current research projects include assessment of the effectiveness of shared vehicle arrangements in German and other European cities. One of these will publish findings early in 1998. The other is informing the Edinburgh City Car Club, due to start operating in April.

School Journeys

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the proportion of children who *(a)* walked and

(b) cycled to school in (i) 1995, (ii) 1990, (iii) 1985, (iv) 1980, (v) 1975 and (vi) 1970; and if he will make a statement. [15648]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Figures are available for Great Britain from the *National Travel Survey* only for the years shown in the table.

Percentage of journeys to school by children aged 5–15: 1975–76 to 1994–96

	1975–76	*1985–86*	*1989–91*	*1994–96*
Walking	61	57	56	52
Cycling	4	3	2	11

House Building (Essex)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate how many new homes are to be built before 2016 in *(a)* the County of Essex, *(b)* the Borough of Colchester and *(c)* the District of Tendring. [15773]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 13 November 1997]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave on Wednesday 12 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *554*. It will be for the Essex County Council to consider how many additional dwellings will be needed between 2011 and 2016, after taking into account the revised Regional Planning Guidance for the South East (RPG9) now in preparation.

Local Authority Rents

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the gross cost to public funds if all local authority rents were to be cut by *(a)* 9 per cent., *(b)* 8 per cent., *(c)* 7 per cent., *(d)* 6 per cent., *(e)* 5 per cent., *(f)* 4 per cent., *(g)* 3 per cent., *(h)* 2 per cent. and *(i)* 1 per cent.; and what would be the cost net of savings in (i) housing benefits and (ii) public expenditure linked to the RPI. [15861]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 13 November 1997]:* A reduction in Guideline Rent in 1998–99 for Housing Revenue Account local authorities in England would have the following estimated effects:

Present value (discounting to 1996–97) of effects from 1998–99 to 2027–28
1996–97 prices discounting to 1996–97

£ million

Guideline rent reduction in 1998–99	*Loss of gross rental income*	*Saving in rent rebates*	*Saving in public expenditure linked to the RPI*	*Net public expenditure cost*
1 per cent.	582	444	134	4
2 per cent.	1,164	888	268	8
3 per cent.	1,746	1,326	402	18
4 per cent.	2,328	1,767	537	24
5 per cent.	2,910	2,207	671	32
6 per cent.	3,492	2,642	805	45
7 per cent.	4,074	3,080	939	55
8 per cent.	4,656	3,517	1,073	66
9 per cent.	5,238	3,948	1,207	83
10 per cent.	5,820	4,378	1,341	100

Figures in the table have been rounded to the nearest £1 million. The calculations are derived from LAMOD, the Department's model for estimating the public expenditure effects of a change in Guideline Rent policy for local authorities. The results from LAMOD are sensitive to assumptions which are kept under continuous review.

Household Sizes

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been *(a)* the population, *(b)* the number of households, *(c)* the number of single households and *(d)* the number of single parent households in (i) Essex County, (ii) Colchester Borough and (iii) Tendring District in each year since 1967. [15774]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 13 November 1997]:* The availalble estimates are as follows:

Thousands

	(a) Population	*(b) All households*	*(c) One person households*	*(d) Lone parent households*
(i) Essex				
1971	1,366	462	69	9
1972[1]	1,385	468	74	25
1973[1]	1,398	476	77	27
1974[1]	1,406	482	80	27
1975[1]	1,416	489	83	28

Thousands

	(a) Population	*(b) All households*	*(c) One person households*	*(d) Lone parent households*
1976[1]	1,429	497	87	30
1977[1]	1,438	505	90	31
1978[1]	1,449	512	94	33
1979[1]	1,462	521	98	34
1980[1]	1,475	529	102	36
1981	1,483	539	105	16
1982	1,484	544	108	17
1983	1,493	553	112	18
1984	1,499	561	115	19
1985	1,509	570	119	19
1986	1,517	579	123	20
1987	1,527	588	127	21
1988	1,536	596	132	22
1989	1,540	602	137	23
1990	1,543	607	143	23
1991	1,547	612	149	25
1992	1,556	620	154	26
1993	1,560	626	159	27
1994	1,570	634	164	28

Thousands

	(a) Population	*(b) All households*	*(c) One person households*	*(d) Lone parent households*
1995	1,578	643	170	28
1996	1,586	—	—	—
(ii) Colchester				
1971	120	40	6	1
1972[1]	123	42	7	3
1973[1]	125	42	7	3
1974[1]	127	43	8	3
1975[1]	128	44	8	3
1976[1]	131	45	8	3
1977[1]	132	46	8	3
1978[1]	134	46	9	3
1979[1]	135	47	9	3
1980[1]	137	48	10	3
1981	138	49	10	2
1982	138	49	10	2
1983	138	50	10	2
1984	138	51	10	2
1985	140	52	11	2
1986	141	53	11	2
1987	142	54	11	2
1988	144	55	12	2
1989	145	56	12	2
1990	146	57	13	2
1991	146	57	13	3
1992	149	58	14	3
1993	149	59	15	3
1994	150	59	15	3
1995	151	60	15	3
1996	154	—	—	—
(iii) Tendring				
1971	103	39	8	1
1972[1]	105	40	9	2
1973[1]	108	42	10	2
1974[1]	109	42	10	2
1975[1]	110	43	10	2
1976[1]	112	44	11	2
1977[1]	113	45	11	2
1978[1]	113	45	12	2
1979[1]	114	46	12	2
1980	115	46	12	2
1981	115	47	13	1
1982	114	47	13	1
1983	115	48	13	1
1984	117	49	14	1
1985	118	50	14	1
1986	119	50	14	1
1987	122	52	15	1
1988	125	53	15	1
1989	126	54	16	2
1990	128	54	16	2
1991	127	54	16	2
1992	128	55	17	2
1993	129	55	17	2
1994	131	56	18	2
1995	132	57	18	2
1996	132	—	—	—

[1] The lone parent households: The figures for 1972 to 1980 include lone parent households with one or more never-married children, whereas for other years the figures only include those with one or more dependent children i.e., children aged 0–15; or aged 16–18, never-married and in full time education.

Compulsory Purchase

Mr. Jim Cunninghamn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of research conducted by the City University on compulsory purchase procedures; and what plans he has for changes in the operation of such procedures. [15484]

Mr. Raynsford: I hope to publish shortly the report of the research conducted by the City University into the operation of the compulsory purchase procedures. I will want to hear the views of interested organisations and persons on the findings of that research before considering whether any changes may be appropriate to the arrangements for compulsory acquisition and compensation.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

"Excellence in schools"

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what estimate he has made of the proportion of the response to his White Paper "Excellence in schools", which related to each of the chapters upon which comment was sought; and in each case, approximately what proportion of comment expressed *(a)* support for and *(b)* opposition to the approach outlined or described; [16055]

(2) how many responses were received to the White Paper "Excellence in schools"; and of these how many *(a)* were on the tear-off forms in the summary document, *(b)* were written responses, *(c)* were in some other form, *(d)* addressed specifically the questions posed in the White Paper and *(e)* ranged beyond the questions posed. [16056]

Mr. Byers: We received over 8,000 responses to the White Paper of which some 3,500 were written responses to the full version. The remainder were a combination of tear-off slips and other forms of communication.

Of the 3,500, 138 were from Local Education Authorities and about 600, 2,100 and 700 came from representative organisations, schools and individuals respectively. A breakdown between grant-maintained and LEA-maintained schools is not currently available.

Most responses addressed issues from more than one chapter and many ranged beyond the specific questions posed. There was broad support for the contents of the White Paper.

We continue to consider all the responses in detail.

Head Teachers

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many head teacher and deputy head teacher posts are currently vacant in

local education authority maintained *(a)* secondary and *(b)* primary schools. [16090]

Mr. Byers: The number of head teacher and deputy head teacher vacancies, at January 1997, in local education authority maintained nursery, primary and secondary schools in England is shown in the following table. Vacancies in grant maintained schools are not included.

Grade of post vacant[1]	*Nursery/primary*	*Secondary*
Head teacher	122	29
Deputy head	202	31

[1] Only those posts which were advertised at 16 January 1997 as full-time permanent posts or posts of at least one term's duration are counted as vacancies.

Special Needs

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in encouraging local education associations, other local agencies and business to work together to co-ordinate support for children with special educational needs. [15485]

Ms Estelle Morris: On 22 October we published a Green Paper, "Excellence for All Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs", which encourages local education authorities, other local agencies and business to work together to support the education of children with special educational needs. We are consulting on how to improve and develop such co-ordination.

INDEX TO THE

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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3rd November—14th November 1997

SCOPE OF THE INDEX, ARRANGEMENT AND ABBREVIATIONS

This index is derived from the House of Commons Library's Parliamentary On-Line Information System (POLIS), and the subject terms used are based on those used in POLIS. There are often changes in column numbering, etc., between the daily part or weekly Hansard (which simply collects together the daily parts without revision) and the bound volume. The index for the bound volume is revised to take account of these changes and cannot therefore, be used in connection with the daily part or weekly Hansard. For these versions use the Fortnightly Index.

Scope and arrangement of the Index

Oral and Written Parliamentary Questions are indexed under subject headings and the names of Members asking and Ministers replying to them. Questions are not listed under the names of Departments replying. Departmental listings can be arrived at indirectly by looking under the names of the Minister(s) of that Department. There are, however, the headings 'Northern Ireland', 'Scotland', and 'Wales' under which one can find not only most Questions answered by the Northern Ireland Office, Scottish Office, Welsh Office but also Questions about these areas of the United Kingdom which are answered by other Departments. Ministerial statements are indexed under subject headings, under 'Ministerial statements' and the names of Ministers making them and Members speaking on them. General debates are indexed under broad subject headings and under the names of all Members and Ministers taking part. Debates on legislation (Bills, Orders, Regulations etc.) are indexed under the name of the Bill, Statutory Instruments etc, under subject headings and under the names of those taking part.

Rulings and Statements by Speaker and deputies are brought together under the heading 'Speaker's rulings and statements'.

Other contributions by Speaker and deputies appear under the heading Speaker.

Opposition Day Debates and Estimates Day Debates and Standing Order No. 10 applications are listed under those respective headings and under subject headings too.

The date of each item except Parliamentary Questions is inserted immediately before the reference.

Members' names are given in the form by which they prefer to be known and are printed in bold italics. Under their names, entries are arranged under one of the two headings *Debates, etc.* (to include interventions on statements, points of order and so on) or *Questions.*

Abbreviations

Bills 1R = first reading, 2R = second reading, Money res = money resolution, Comm = Committee stage, Rep = Report stage, 3R = third reading, amendt/amendts = amendment/amendments, * = matter taken formally, without debate.

Column numbers followed by the letter W refer to Written Questions. These appear at the end of each daily part or volume with their own sequence of column numbers printed in italics.

A5
(05.11.97) 279–86

A12
179w, (12.11.97) 875–80

A40
Cheltenham 484w

A66
Road works 695w

A134
179w

A449
Road safety 604w

Abbott, Ms Diane
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 711, 717, 727, 745, 747, 760, 763–6
Questions
ACP countries, Bananas 388w
British dependent territories 499–500w
Commonwealth, Bananas 388–9w
Legal aid 574
Montserrat, Disasters 498–9w
Montserrat, Hospitals 499w
Montserrat, Housing construction 499w, 891
Montserrat, Refugees 499w
Windward Islands, Technical assistance 440–1w

Absent parents
Income 188w

Access funds
Part-time education 307w, 522–3w

Access to buildings
Building regulations 477–8w
Polling stations 647w

Access to countryside
58w, 604w
Countryside stewardship scheme 339w

Access to Neighbouring Land Act 1992
Questions
Northern Ireland 98w

Access to Parliament
Work experience 123w

Accident and emergency departments
660w
Community health services 349w
Gloucestershire 660w
Hospital admissions 180w

Accountants
Mutual recognition of qualifications 473w

Accounts Commission for Scotland
East Lothian District Council 575–6w

ACP countries
Bananas 199–200w, 388w

Ad Hoc Working Party on Emergency Communications
see Emergency Communications Ad Hoc Working Party

ADAPT initiative
556w

Admiralty House
Official hospitality 342–3w

Adoption
Cohabitation 74–5w

Adult education
1031–2

Advance corporation tax
Chelmsford Borough Council 480–1w
Church Commissioners 9w
Essex County Council 480–1w

Advance directives
267w

Advertising controls
Disability Discrimination Act 1995 532w
Gaming clubs 459–60w
Local authority powers 479w

Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification
Business interests 71w

Advisory services
Family income 64w
Pensions 595w

Advocacy
Children 660–1w

Agricultural research
618–9w

Agriculture
Scotland 155w
Wales (05.11.97) 249–70

Agri-environment action plan
Wales 235w

Ainger, Mr Nick
Questions
Low flying, Military aircraft 79w
Magistrates' courts, Closures 575–6
Pigs, Animal welfare 38w

Air accidents
366w
Chinook helicopters 687w
Harrier aircraft 318w
Military aircraft 318w

Air fares
Pricing 241–2w

Air force
Defence review 8–9

Air pollution
Coal 42–3w
Heart diseases 348w
Mercury 606–7w

Air pollution control
494w
Recycling 490–1w

Air Quality Regulations 1997
Questions
494w

Air safety
Transport of radioactive materials 278w

Aircraft engines
Government assistance to industry 626–7w

Aitken, Jonathan
211w, 557–8w

Alcohol and crime
Scotland 102

Alexander, Mr Douglas
Debates etc.
Members' oath and affirmation, (12.11.97) 907

Algeria
Capital punishment 389–90w
Human rights 170–1w
Political refugees 19w

All party groups
217w

Allan, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 158
Questions
Political refugees 416–8w

Alternative dispute resolution
205–6w

Alternative medicine
904

Amess, Mr David
Questions
Common fisheries policy 382–3
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions, Official hospitality 138w
Hospital discharges 538w
Nuclear weapons policy 3
Solicitors, Complaints 52w

Amritsar massacre
175w

Amsterdam Summit
UK delegations 561w

Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Debates etc.
Oral question time intervention (05.11.97) 298
Student grants (04.11.97) 161–4, 167
Questions
Campbell, Jason, Prisoners' transfers 96, 303–4w
Local government corruption, Scotland 101
National Assembly of Wales 301–2
Prisoners, Scotland 305w
Prisoners' transfers, Northern Ireland 304–5w

Anderson, Mr Donald
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 928–33, 1001
Questions
National Assembly of Wales 302
UN Special Commission on Iraq 581–2, 1160

Animal breeding
Cattle 384

Animal experiments
282–6w, 374w
Cosmetics 121w, 629w
Defence research 284w, 687w, 689–90w
Huntingdon Life Sciences 647w
Informative labelling 629w
Research finance 284w
Training 284–5w

Animal feed
Pigs 38w

Animal Procedures Committee
286w

Animal welfare
127w
Battery hens 382
Livestock 332w
Pigs 38w
Poultry 137w
Prosecutions 363w

Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986
Questions
282–6w, 374w

Animals Scientific Procedures Inspectorate
see Scientific Procedures Inspectorate

Anniversaries
World War I 12–4, 313

Antarctic
Ozone layer 266w

Antarctic Treaty
202w
Japan 202w

Appropriate adults
Scotland 95–6

Arable farming
Countryside stewardship scheme 37w

Arachnoiditis
433w, 596w

Arbuthnot, Mr James
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 213

Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust
Flags 6w

Armed conflict
Monuments 30–1w

Armed forces
10–1
Career structure 110w
Complaints 320–1w
Drunkenness 79w
Employment discrimination 613w
Helicopters 582w
Millennium compliance 109–10w
Racial discrimination 449–50w

Armed forces civilians
Iraq-Kuwait conflict 82w

Armed forces deployment
Iraq 582
Northern Ireland 324–5w

Armed forces housing
Colchester 361w
Northern Ireland 322w

Armed forces medical services
78–9w

Armed forces officers
NATO 581w

Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency
611–2w

Armed forces recruitment
78w

Armed forces reserves
Defence review 2–3

Armed forces storage depots
611w

Armed forces strength
Northern Ireland 323–4w

Armed forces training
494–5w, 576w
Kenya 494w

Armed forces women
Territorial Army 3

Arms exports
Export credit 245–6w
Export Credits Guarantee Dept 242w
Export licensing 7–8, 614w, 629–30w
Wales 619–20w
Welsh Development Agency 237–8w
Welsh Office 518w

Arms surplus sales
686–7w

Arms trade
252w, 627w
EC action 169w
USA 615w, 620w

***Armstrong, Hilary**, Minister of State for Local Government and Housing, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions*

Armstrong, Hilary—continued
Debates etc.
Local Government (Contracts) Bill, Lords amendts (11.11.97) 810–1, 813–4, 816
Private roads (03.11.97) 90–4
Questions
Government grants to local authorities 279–80w
Local government reform, Government grants to local authorities 72–3w
Rent Officer Service Agency 198w

Army
Defence review 80w
Israel 165–6w

Arts
406w

Arts sponsorship
Tobacco advertising 353–4w

Asbestos
57w

Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Questions
Election expenditure 901–2
Tuition fees, Scotland 308–9

Assisted areas
564w

Assisted places scheme
Devon 226w

Association of Scottish Community Councils
655w

Asylum
see Political refugees

Athletics
Training 564

Atkins, Charlotte
Questions
New deal for young unemployed 667w

Atkinson, Mr David
Questions
Banks, Millennium compliance 101w
British embassies, Telephones 264w
Evidence, Closed circuit television 407w
Gates, Bill 261w
Guided weapons 83w
Middle East, Peace negotiations 498w
Millennium compliance 386w, 569w
Millennium compliance, EC action 468w
NATO, Millennium compliance 109–10w
Palestinians, Overseas aid 897
Political refugees, Pakistan 21w
Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust 349w
Russia, Ministers' visits abroad 261w

Atkinson, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 178–9

Attorney General
Developing countries trade 684w
Legislation 115w

Austin, Mr John
Debates etc.
Religious Discrimination Bill, 1R (13.11.97) 1048
Questions
Business questions 1044–5
Council house rents 698w
Departmental correspondence 501–2w
Railway safety, Passengers 69w
Railway travel, Passengers 438–40w
Railway travel, Safety measures 69–70w

Australia
Ethnic groups 175w
Republicanism 202w

Backbenchers
108–9

Badgers
Bovine tuberculosis 385

Bain Commission
see Low Pay Commission

Baker, Norman
Questions
Animal experiments, Defence research 689–90w
Birmingham relief road, Compensation 476w
Central government, Mass media 452w
Church Commissioners, Monsanto 10w
Forests 493–4w
Intelligence services, Complaints 4w
Intelligence services, Reviews 566w
Intelligence Services Act 1994 25w
Interception of Communications Act 1985 26–7w
Lewes Prison, Prison population 30w
Mail on Sunday, Injunctions 418–9w
MI5, Surveillance 119w
Minister Without Portfolio, Open government 464w
Ministerial duties 452w
Ministers, Travelling expenses 452w
Northern Ireland Information Service, Public appointments 396w
Packaging, Recycling 489–90w
Paper, Recycling 489w
Planning blight 70w
Polegate bypass, Compensation 195w
Public records 474–5w
RAF Menwith Hill 450w
Railway freight transport 71w
Recycling 491–2w
Recycling, Air pollution control 490–1w
Rolling stock leasing companies, Finance 71–2w
Security Service Tribunal, Complaints 4w
Sports, Television 569–70
Telecommunications technology, Planning permission 70–1w
Tibet, Overseas aid 591w
Tipping of waste 487–8w, 553w
Tipping of waste, Methane 487w
Trident, Defence procurement 450w
Trident, Defence review 450w
Waste disposal 488w

Baldry, Mr Tony
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 401–2
Questions
British Academy of Sport 569
Minimum wage 1025
Montserrat, Housing construction 890–1
National Assembly of Wales 299–300
Territorial Army, Peace keeping operations 81w

Ballard, Mrs Jackie
Questions
Companies, Voluntary work 682w
Concessionary television licences 467w
Dental services, Patients 182w
Hill livestock allowances 233w
NHS finance 312–3
Rivers, Safety measures 138w
Statute law, Law reform 427–8w

Bananas
ACP countries 199–200w, 388w
Caribbean 93–4w, 133–4w, 589–90w
Commonwealth 388–9w
Imports 131–4w

***Bananas**—continued*
World Trade Organisation 93–4w, 199–200w, 242–3w, 388–9w, 590w

Bangladesh
Overseas trade 297w

Bank of Credit and Commerce International
Company liquidations 124w

Bank of England
Treasury 506w

Bank of England Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R (11.11.97) 711–809

Banking Insurance and Finance Union
472w

Banking Ombudsman
679w

Banks
Industrial relations 472w
Millennium compliance 101w
Nazi victims 402w

***Banks, Mr Tony**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Culture Media and Sport*
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 596
Questions
Athletics, Training 564
British Academy of Sport 407w, 467w, 564–5
Football 405w
National Lottery, Sports facilities 466–7w
National Lottery, Tennis 466w
Sports, Handicapped 566
Sports sponsorship, Tobacco advertising 353–4w, 467–8w
Tennis 466w
Tennis, Clubs 466w
World Cup 406–7w

Banner Committee
see Animal Procedures Committee

Barnes, Mr Harry
Debates etc.
Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, 1R (12.11.97) 908–9
Questions
Business questions 1043–4
Government information services, Northern Ireland 360–1w
Iraq, Sanctions 583
Proscribed organisations, Crimes of violence 204w

Barnet
Political refugees 209w

Barnsley Hospital
Private finance initiative 535w

Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust
Public appointments 76–7w, 435–6w, 665w

Batteries
Defence procurement 79–80w

Battery hens
Animal welfare 382

***Battle, Mr John**, Minister of State, Dept of Trade and Industry*
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 343–50, 352, 356, 362–4
Questions
Animal welfare 127w

***Battle, Mr John**—continued*
Biotechnology, EC action 572w
British Coal Corporation, Housing 124w
British Nuclear Fuels 43w, 379w
British Nuclear Fuels, Financial targets 295w
Carbon dioxide, Nuclear power 570w
Coal 40w
Coal, Air pollution 42–3w
Coal mine closures 245w
EC Energy Council 299w
Greenhouse effect, Dept of Trade and Industry 571w
Mixed oxide fuel, Transport of radioactive materials 44w
Nuclear safety, Russia 630w
Plutonium, Radioactive waste disposal 296–7w
River Wear, Ports 402w
Rolls Royce, Government assistance to industry 626–7w
Science and technology research, Tax allowances 297w
Space technology, Nuclear safety 378w
Sustainable development 378w
THORP, Nuclear fuel reprocessing 297w
Tin, Cornwall 124w

Bayley, Mr Hugh
Questions
National Audit Office, House of Commons select committees 5–6w
Prisoners on remand 413w
Tourist industry, Minimum wage 561
UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator 115w

BBC external services
392–3w

Beaches
Wales 393w

Beard, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 786–7
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 508, 521–4, 528, 534
Questions
Defence review 80w
Treasury Solicitor's Dept, Cash limits 193w

***Beckett, Rt Hon Margaret**, President of the Board of Trade*
Questions
Bank of Credit and Commerce International, Company liquidations 124w
Dept of Trade and Industry, Cash limits 240–1w
Dept of Trade and Industry, Orders and regulations 43–4w
Export credit, Arms exports 245–6w
Export credit guarantees 46w
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Arms exports 242w
Export Forum Working Group 127–8w
Hawk aircraft, Indonesia 401w
Legislation, Dept of Trade and Industry 401w
Members' correspondence, Dept of Trade and Industry 401w
Ministers' visits abroad, India 44–5w
Motor vehicles, Export credit guarantees 377–8w
Overseas trade, India 401w
Regional challenge 126w
Simon of Highbury, Lord, Shares 42w

Bed and breakfast accommodation
Families 66–7w

Beef
389
Cattle 331w

***Beef**—continued*
Exports 233–4w
Farmers 387–8
Food consumption 516w
Food standards 380–1
House of Commons catering 217w
Public opinion 387–8
Wales 303–4

Beef premiums
Northern Ireland 396w

Begg, Miss Anne
Questions
Scottish health boards, Bureaucracy 154w

Beggs, Mr Roy
Questions
Higher education, Belfast 1020–1

Beith, Rt Hon A J
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 33–5, 54, 57–8, 68
Questions
Beef, Farmers 387–8
Crime victims, Mentally handicapped 287w
European Police Office, Immunity from prosecution 558w
Group 4 Securitas, Prison staff 647w
Group 4 Securitas, Prisons 692w
Home Office, Private finance initiative 649–50w
Parenting orders 643–4w
Police, Manpower 211w
Prisoners on remand 28w
Prisoners on remand, Mentally disturbed offenders 654w
Protection from Harassment Act 1997 97–8w
Remand in custody 116–7w
Surveillance, Codes of practice 282w
Tuition fees, Scotland 496w

Belarus
Foreign policy 199w
Know-how Fund 589w
Overseas aid 638w

Belfast
Higher education 1020–1
Public order offences 292w

Bell, Mr Martin
Questions
Defence review 80–1w
Labour Party, Finance 905
Stabilisation Force in Bosnia 5

***Bell, Mr Stuart**, Second Church Estates Commissioner*
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 323–4
Questions
Christianity, Millennium 16–8
Church Commissioners, Advance corporation tax 9w
Church Commissioners, Church property 10w
Church Commissioners, Investment 8–9w
Church Commissioners, Monsanto 10w
Clergy, Pensions 10w, 18
Clergy, Retirement age 18

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate
454w

Benefit integrity project
Disability living allowance 301w

Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Questions
Iraq, Sanctions 579–80

Bennett, Mr Andrew F
Questions
Batteries, Defence procurement 79–80w
Countryside stewardship scheme, Access to countryside 339w
House of Commons times of sittings 111

Bercow, Mr John
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 790
Business questions (06.11.97) 406
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 1002
Oral question time intervention (10.11.97) 565
Parliamentary questions, Points of order (04.11.97) 114
President of the Board of Trade, Points of order (10.11.97) 584
Student grants (04.11.97) 123, 128, 159–61
Questions
Banking Ombudsman 679w
British Academy of Sport 565
Business questions 1047
Special education 1030

Beresford, Sir Paul
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 591–2, 602–3

Bermingham, Mr Gerald
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 400–1
Oral questions, Points of order (11.11.97) 707
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 408
Questions
Blood transfusion services, North West region 706
Crown Prosecution Service 393–4

Best value
479–80w

Beta-interferon
Complaints 179w
Expenditure 46–7w, 128w, 178–9w
Multiple sclerosis 184w
Scotland 46–7w
Wales 128w

Betting and gaming duties
623–4w
Tax yields 624w

Bevan, Aneurin
Prescription charges 701–2

Big Brothers and Big Sisters
Voluntary work (13.11.97) 1130–6

Billing
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 353w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 70w
Dept of Trade and Industry 296w
Home Office 21w
Ministry of Defence 114–5w
Northern Ireland Office 288–9w
Scottish Office 46w
Small businesses 41–2w
Treasury 98–9w

Biological weapons
Testing (12.11.97) 825–45
West Country (12.11.97) 825–45

Biotechnology
EC action 572w
Patents 127w

Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
342w

Birds
Nature conservation 619w

Birmingham Health Authority
Private finance initiative 431–2w

Birmingham Prison
Prisoner escapes 640w

Birmingham relief road
Compensation 476w

Black Country Development Corporation
Departmental correspondence 70w

Blackpool
National Savings Agency 15–6w

***Blair, Rt Hon Tony**, Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service*
Questions
Alternative medicine 904
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Inquiries 5w
Cabinet Office, Cash limits 208–9w
Civil list, Ethnic minorities 464w
Climate Change Convention, UK delegations 464w
Cold weather payments 308
Commonwealth, Yemen 385w
Commonwealth games, Manchester 312
Community protection orders 310
Crawley Hospital, Hospital admissions 902
Departmental correspondence 5w
Developing countries, Debts written off 262w
Developing countries trade, Prime Minister 617w
Development aid 306, 313–4
EC countries, Research 306
EC presidency 385w
EC Social Charter 306–8, 310–2, 314
Election expenditure 901–3
Families 311
Forest protection, Guyana 4–5w
Former Prime ministers 385w
Further education 903
Gates, Bill 261w
Greenbelt, Hertfordshire 309–10
Howard, John 262w
Intelligence services, Complaints 4w
Intelligence services, Select committees 5w
International conferences, Canary Wharf 617w
Labour Party, Finance 902–6
Legislation, Departmental responsibilities 262–3w
Lockerbie, Bombings 3–4w, 262w
Lotteries 309
Millennium, Business 261w
Minister Without Portfolio, Open government 464w
Ministerial policy advisors 615–7w
Monitor Consultancy, Prime Minister 617w
NHS finance 312–3
NHS finance, Derbyshire 906
NHS finance, Worcestershire 904
Northern Ireland government 309
Official engagements 567w
Official secrets, Disclosure of information 260w
Political parties, Finance 899–901
Prime Minister, Interest groups 675w
Princess of Wales, Funerals 3w
Public appointments 261w
Public opinion 385–6w
Reading Borough Council, Members' correspondence 386w
Royal yacht 262w
Russia, Ministers' visits abroad 261w
Schools 313

***Blair, Rt Hon Tony**—continued*
Seals 260–1w
Security Service Tribunal, Complaints 4w
Tobacco advertising 898–901
Transport policy 310–1, 905–6
Tuition fees, Scotland 308–9
World War I, Anniversaries 313
World War II, Monuments 309

Blears, Ms Hazel
Questions
HM Fire Service Inspectorate 282w

Blind
Community care 347w

Blizzard, Mr Bob
Questions
Coastal protection, Waveney 341w
Common agricultural policy 378
EC Transport Council 193–4w
Planning permission, Crime prevention 275w
Public footpaths, Local authority powers 279w
Rural areas, Town and country planning 273w

Blood donors
542w

Blood transfusion services
Hospitals 348w
NHS trusts 348w
North West region 706

***Blunkett, Rt Hon David**, Secretary of State for Education and Employment*
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 123, 127–35, 138
Questions
Employment Service, Annual reports 382–4w
Higher education 1019–22
Higher education, Belfast 1020–1
Minimum wage 1025
New deal for young unemployed 1024–7
Political parties, Finance 1026
School admission, Hertfordshire 1029
Schools 1029–30
Student grants 1022
Student numbers 1021
Tuition fees 1021
Tuition fees, Scotland 1020

Blunt, Mr Crispin
Questions
Cash limits, Government departments 621w
Defence expenditure 83–4w
Defence procurement 12
East Surrey Health Authority 535w
Future large aircraft 255w
Hercules aircraft, Defence procurement 256w
Income support, Handicapped 531–3w
Military aircraft, Costs 255w
Military aircraft, Defence procurement 255w
Military implementation force in Bosnia, Costs 83w
Transport aircraft 255–6w

***Boateng, Mr Paul**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Health*
Debates etc.
Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Voluntary work (13.11.97) 1132–6
Hospitals, South West London (14.11.97) 1212–6

***Boateng, Mr Paul**—continued*
Questions
Accident and emergency departments 660w
Accident and emergency departments, Community health services 349w
Accident and emergency departments, Gloucestershire 660w
Adoption, Cohabitation 74–5w
Blind, Community care 347w
Blood donors 542w
Blood transfusion services, Hospitals 348w
Cancer, Drugs 664w
Cannabis, Medical research 659w
Children, Advocacy 660–1w
Children, Medical treatments 680w
Children in care 77w
Children's rights 381w
Chiropody 661–2w, 681–2w
Chronic fatigue syndrome, Medical research 182–3w
Community hospitals, Cornwall 599w
Community hospitals, Hospital beds 600w
Day care of children 695
Elderly, Weather 601w
Erb's palsy 345w
Handicapped, Crime victims 181–2w
Handicapped children, Health education 680w
Health services, Rural areas 601–2w
Health services, Weather 187w, 432–3w
Hospital admissions, Weather 539–42w
Hospital beds 596w
Hospital discharges 538w, 602w
Incontinence 347w
Kidney patients, Health services 660w
Mentally ill, Harassment 434–5w
Multiple sclerosis 657–8w
Multiple sclerosis, Medical treatments 183w
National Blood Authority 542w
National Blood Authority, Redundancy pay 432w
National Blood Transfusion Service 542w
Nursing homes, Inspections 596w
Organ donors 663w
Orthopaedics 658w
Personal social services, Government grants to local authorities 679–80w
Political refugees, Government grants to local authorities 75–6w
Private health services, NHS finance 430w
Psychology, Medical malpractice 352w
Rowntree, Residential care 433w
Social services, Inter agency cooperation 658w
Solihull Hospital 693
Suicide 437w
Xenotransplantation 664w
Young people, Industrial health and safety 217–8w

Body, Sir Richard
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 938, 960–1
Questions
Economic and monetary union, Public sector debt 504–5w
European currency unit 98w
European currency unit, Design 505w
European strategic programme for research in information, Schools 245w
Export credit guarantees 46w
Export Credits Guarantee Dept, Arms exports 242w
Fishery agreements, EC budget 35–6w
Fishing vessels, Multiannual guidance programme 134w
Princess of Wales, Funerals 3w
Tourist industry, EC budget 513w

Body searches
287w

Bolsover
Dioxins 330–1w

Bombings
Lockerbie 3–4w, 46w, 169–70w, 262w, (07.11.97) 543–58

Border security in Ireland
289–92w

Borrow, Mr David
Questions
Air force, Defence review 8–9
Community Fire Safety Task Force 212–3w

Bosnia-Herzegovina
Defence expenditure 5–6
Overseas aid 592w
War crimes 5, 390w

Boswell, Mr Tim
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 738, 800–1
Questions
Central banks 511–2w
Finance Bill 1997/98, Legislative process 108
Hospitals, Private finance initiative 543–4w
Tuition fees, Scotland 228w
£2 coins 225w

Bottomley, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 713
Road safety (05.11.97) 232–5, 245–6
Questions
Court rules and procedures, Young people 546w
Prescription charges, Pensioners 701

Bottomley, Rt Hon Virginia
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 25
Road safety (05.11.97) 240–1
Questions
Cystic fibrosis, Health services 661w
Drug industry 217w
Health service staff 703
National Lottery 567–8
NHS trusts, Public appointments 349–50w

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy
331w, 334–40w
Disease control 332–3w, 342w, 365w
Industrial health and safety 280w
Inquiries 5w, 233w
Northern Ireland 395–6w
Waste disposal 619w

Bovine tuberculosis
Badgers 385

Bowman Committee
see Court of Appeal (Civil Division) Review

***Bradley, Mr Keith**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Social Security*
Questions
Absent parents, Income 188w
Child Support Agency 675w
Earnings rules 635–6w
Family benefits, Social security benefits reductions 84–5w
Gingerbread, New deal for lone parents 376w
Housing benefits, Interest payments 300w
Income support, Handicapped 531–3w

***Bradley, Mr Keith**—continued*
Income support, Mortgages 188w, 301w, 455w, 634–5w
Lone parent premium 89w
Lone parents, Family premium 88–9w
Lone parents, Income support 86–7w
Lone parents, Social security claims 676–7w
Lone parents, Social security recipients 88w
Maintenance, Children 189w
Millennium compliance, Dept of Social Security 189–90w
New deal for lone parents 87w, 300w, 375–7w, 675–6w
New deal for lone parents, Child care 633–4w
New deal for lone parents, West Midlands 633w
One parent benefit 87w
Social security 90w
Social security, Expenditure 85w
Social security appeals 455w
Social security benefits, Political refugees 85w, 190w
Social security benefits backdating 85–6w
Social security claims, Student loans 675w
Social security payments 188w
War pensions, Earnings rules 84w

Bradley, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
A5 (05.11.97) 283
Rural areas (04.11.97) 180

Bradshaw, Mr Ben
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 24
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 923
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1114–6
Questions
Beef, Food standards 380–1

Brady, Mr Graham
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 141–3
Questions
Business questions 1048
Fluoridation 379w
Labour Party, Finance 904–5
Milk Development Council, Taxation 573w
NHS, Welfare to work 539w
Special education 1033

Brake, Mr Tom
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 640–1, 648
Housing construction (12.11.97) 855–8
Road safety (05.11.97) 236–8
Rural areas (04.11.97) 199–200
Traffic lights (12.11.97) 872
Questions
Belarus, Overseas aid 638w
Hospital waiting lists 348w
NHS, Patients 347–8w
Road freight transport, Compensation 552w
Sewage 271w, 365w
Sewage, Floods 270–1w

Brand, Dr Peter
Questions
Tobacco advertising 701

Brands
Marketing 402w

Brazier, Mr Julian
Questions
Armed forces reserves, Defence review 2–3

Breast cancer
Ministerial statements (03.11.97) 19–28

Breed, Mr Colin
Questions
Community hospitals, Hospital beds 600w

Brent
Grant maintained schools 529w

Brewing industry
131w

Bridges
River Dee 48w
Road works 272–3w

Brinton, Mrs Helen
Questions
Greenbelt 54w
Households, Population projection 56w
Housing, Research 268w
Housing, Town and country planning 68w
Noise control, Clubs 147–8w
Railway transport, Regulatory systems 282w
Railway travel, Performance standards 280–1w
Rented housing 54–5w
Rural transport 54w
Young offenders, Remand in custody 213–5w

British Academy of Sport
407w, 467w, 560, 564–5, 569

British Cattle Movement Service
545w

British Coal Corporation
Housing 124w

British dependent territories
499–500w

British embassies
Telephones 264w

British Nuclear Fuels
43w, 379w
Financial targets 295w

British Railways Board
External financing limits 193w

Bromsgrove
Council housing 484–5w

Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 400
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 63–4
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 587, 603–6
Police (14.11.97) 1167–71
Questions
UN Special Commission on Iraq 1160–1

Brown, Rt Hon Gordon, Chancellor of the Exchequer
Questions
Budget 259w
Dorneywood, Official hospitality 18w
EC Finance Council 16–8w, 504w
Economic and monetary union 223w
Economic and monetary union, Ministerial policy advisors 221–2w
European currency unit 259w
Intelligence services, Reviews 566w
Millennium compliance, Treasury 622w
Ministerial policy advisors 222w, 225w

Brown, Rt Hon Gordon—continued
Treasury, International conferences 104–7w

Brown, Mr Russell
Questions
Local government social services, Scotland 101

Browne, Mr Desmond
Questions
Alcohol and crime, Scotland 102

Browning, Mrs Angela
Debates etc.
Education (Student Loans) Bill, Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 76–8
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 938, 951–6, 964, 980, 985
Questions
Developing countries, Small businesses 592–3w
Magistrates' courts 428–9w
Special education 1031
Tuition fees, Scotland 156–7w

Bruce, Mr Ian
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 828–30, 834, 836–7
Leader of the Opposition, Points of order (11.11.97) 708
Student grants (04.11.97) 119, 130–1
Questions
Business questions 1042–3
Developing countries, Child workers 896–7
Forestry Commission, Scotland 155w
Hospital waiting lists 697
National Audit Office 15–6
Student grants 1023
Trials 267w

Bruce, Mr Malcolm
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 713, 726, 728, 739, 748–53
Questions
Budget 259w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Dept for Education and Employment 530w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 553–4w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Home Office 643–4w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Ministry of Defence 495w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Scottish Office 656w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Welsh Office 520w
Dept of Health, Public expenditure 184w
Dept of Health, Tax assessment 184w
Dept of Social Security, Public expenditure 247w
European currency unit 259w
Health insurance, Tax allowances 185w
Health services, Weather 187w
Hospital waiting lists 187w
Income tax 387w
Income tax, Tax allowances 510w
Millennium compliance 95w
Millennium compliance, Cabinet Office 96–7w
Millennium compliance, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 107–8w
Millennium compliance, Dept for Education and Employment 163–4w
Millennium compliance, Dept for International Development 92–3w

Bruce, Mr Malcolm—continued
Millennium compliance, Dept of Health 185–6w
Millennium compliance, Dept of Social Security 189–90w
Millennium compliance, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 149–51w
Millennium compliance, Dept of Trade and Industry 126w, 244w, 298w
Millennium compliance, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 173–5w
Millennium compliance, Government departments 96w
Millennium compliance, Home Office 120–1w
Millennium compliance, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 135–6w
Millennium compliance, Ministry of Defence 108–9w
Millennium compliance, Northern Ireland Office 177–8w
Millennium compliance, Scottish Office 158–9w
Millennium compliance, Treasury 621–2w
Millennium compliance, Welsh Office 130–1w
Millennium Exhibition 344–5w, 573w
Millennium Exhibition, Consultants 609–10w
Millennium Exhibition, Pricing 344w
Ministers' visits abroad, Dept of Health 544w
Ministers' visits abroad, Dept of Social Security 532w
Ministers' visits abroad, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 502–4w
Ministers' visits abroad, Home Office 642–4w
Ministers' visits abroad, Lord Chancellor's Dept 474w
Ministers' visits abroad, Welsh Office 520w
National insurance contributions, Employers' contributions 455w
NHS, Millennium compliance 219–20w
NHS finance 436–8w, 543w, 623w
Official hospitality, Dept for Education and Employment 530w
Official hospitality, Home Office 640–1w
Official hospitality, Ministry of Defence 495w
Official hospitality, Welsh Office 519–20w
Public expenditure 259w, 386–7w, 622–3w
Public sector earnings 259w
Publicity, Dept for Education and Employment 530–1w
Publicity, Home Office 641–2w
Publicity, Welsh Office 520–1w
Student loans 260w
Tax and Benefits Task Force 259w
Tax avoidance, Dept for Education and Employment 227w
Tax avoidance, Dept of Health 219w
Tax avoidance, Dept of Social Security 247w
Tax avoidance, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 195w
Tax avoidance, Dept of Trade and Industry 402w
Tax avoidance, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 636w
Tax avoidance, Government departments 354–5w
Tax avoidance, Home Office 213w
Tax avoidance, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341–2w
Tax avoidance, Ministry of Defence 252w
Tax avoidance, NHS 184–5w
Tax avoidance, Scottish Office 233w

Bruce, Mr Malcolm*—*continued
Tax avoidance, Welsh Office 240w
Tax harmonisation, EC countries 258w, 509w
Tax yields 510w
Taxable benefits, Tax yields 454–5w
Taxation, Dept for Education and Employment 227–8w
Taxation, Dept of Health 219w
Taxation, Dept of Social Security 247w
Taxation, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 194w
Taxation, Dept of Trade and Industry 627–9w
Taxation, Home Office 213w
Taxation, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341w
Taxation, Ministry of Defence 318w
Taxation, Northern Ireland Office 289w
Taxation, Scottish Office 232–3w
Taxation, Treasury 258w, 636–7w
Taxation, Welsh Office 240w
Treasury, Government information services 354w
UK contributions to EC budget 510–1w
VAT, Energy conservation 511w
VAT, Government departments 354w
VAT, NHS trusts 354w

Buck, Ms Karen
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 637–40
Questions
Council tax, London boroughs 546w
Homelessness 547–9w
Tenant eviction 603w

Budget
259w

Building regulations
Access to buildings 477–8w

Building repairs
Council housing 145–6w

Building Societies Ombudsman
679w

Buildings
Lord Chancellor's Dept 576

Bull bars
(04.11.97) 116–7

Bulls
Spain 175w

Burglar alarms
Hoaxes and false alarms 461w

Burgon, Mr Colin
Questions
Museums and galleries 405w

Burma
Democracy 202w
Human rights 15w

Burnett, Mr John
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 26–7
Legal aid scheme (05.11.97) 294
Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 341–2
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 417, 448, 451, 454
Questions
Civil proceedings 49–50w
Civil proceedings, Insurance 50–1w
Community hospitals, Nurses 601–2w
Conditional fee agreements, Legal aid 52w
Law reform 51–2w
Legal aid 574
Magistrates' courts, Tavistock 428w

Burnett, Mr John*—*continued
Racial incitement 390

Burns, Mr Simon
Questions
Chelmsford Borough Council, Advance corporation tax 480–1w
Class sizes, Primary education 155w
Gingerbread, New deal for lone parents 376w
House of Commons, Postal services 400w
New deal for lone parents 375–6w
Prisons, Essex 419w
Reardon, Steve, Information officers 453–4w
Social security, Interest groups 454w
Social security appeals 455w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 1163–4
Welfare to work 442w

Burstow, Mr Paul
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 592
Hospitals, South West London (14.11.97) 1208–9
Local Government (Contracts) Bill, Lords amendts (11.11.97) 814
Questions
Beta-interferon, Complaints 179w
Beta-interferon, Expenditure 46–7w, 128w, 178w
Blind, Community care 347w
Dept of Health, Press releases 659w
Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Advertising controls 532w
Disability living allowance 250–1w
"Excellence For All Children Consultation Paper", Video recordings 309–10w
Handicapped, Crime victims 181–2w
Health action zones 482w
Health authorities, Contracts 350w, 393w, 653w
Health services, Political refugees 435w
Health services, Weather 432–3w
Incontinence 347w
Leisure facilities, Town and country planning 481w
Local government reform, Costs 482w
Local government revenue 278w
Multiple sclerosis 657–8w
North Derbyshire Health Authority 181w
Nursing homes, Inspections 596w
Orange badge scheme 54w
Road accidents, Eyesight 366w
Rowntree, Residential care 433w
Social services, Inter agency cooperation 519w, 658w, 682–3w

Bus services
Privatisation 146w
Regulatory systems 294–5w

Business
EC enlargement 126–7w
Millennium 261w

Business interests
Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification 71w

Business Link
378w
Government grants 295–6w
Small businesses 296w

Business motions
(11.11.97) 809, (13.11.97) 1129

Business questions
1040–8

Business statements
(06.11.97) 395–406, 1037–40

Butane gas
Solvent abuse 119w

Butler, Mrs Christine
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Disease control 332–3w

Butterfill, Mr John
Debates etc.
Poole Harbour bridge (12.11.97) 1010
Questions
Free trade 889–90

Byers, Mr Stephen, Minister for School Standards, Dept for Education and Employment
Debates etc.
Education (Student Loans) Bill, Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 77, 82
Questions
Assisted places scheme, Devon 226w
Church schools 521–2w, 672w, 1032
Class sizes 666w
Cost per pupil 669–71w
Educational finance 32w
Educational standards 700w
"Excellence in Schools White Paper" 34w, 668w, 673–4w
Grammar schools 445w
Grant maintained schools 34w, 448w
Grant maintained schools, Brent 529w
Grant maintained schools, School admission 667w
Hackney Education Authority, Inspections 529–30w
Headteachers, Vacancies 700–1w
National literacy strategy 667w
Office for Standards in Education, Operating costs 308w
Physical education, Tennis 669w
Pre-school education, Pupil-teacher ratios 33w
Pre-school education, School population 33–4w
School admission 667w
School buildings, Repairs and maintenance 31–2w
School governors 668w
Teachers, Early retirement 310w, 446w
Teachers, Redundancy 310w, 445–6w

Cabinet committees
Environmental policy 60w, 546w

Cabinet Office
Cash limits 208–9w
Millennium compliance 96–7w

Cable, Mr Vincent
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 780–3
Fire services, Greater London (06.11.97) 467–70
Police (14.11.97) 1172–6
Questions
Pre-school education 668w
Science and technology research, Tax allowances 297w

Cable systems
Radio 44w

Cable television
Road works 402–3w
West Midlands 402–3w

CABnet 2000
401–2w

Caborn,Mr Richard, Minister for the Regions Regeneration and Planning,Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions

***Cabom,Mr Richard**—continued*
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 598
Housing construction (12.11.97) 863–4, 866–70
Questions
Car boot sales, Licensing 121w
Environmental impact assessment, EC law 555w
Regional development agencies 148w
Regional development agencies, Voluntary organisations 482w
Regional government 607w
Regional planning and development, EC action 555w
Telecommunications technology, Planning permission 152–3w
White Rock Business Park Paignton, Planning inquiries 152w

Caledonian MacBrayne
156w

Calman Working Group
see Noise Induced Hearing Loss and War Pensions Review Group

Cambridge University
Higher education administration 447–8w
Private education 448w
University finance 448w
Wealth 448w

Campbell, Mr Alan
Questions
Dept of Trade and Industry, Cash limits 240–1w

Campbell, Mrs Anne
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 400
Questions
Agricultural research 618–9w
Higher education 1020
National Blood Transfusion Service 694

Campbell, Jason
Prisoners' transfers 95–6, 303–4w

Campbell, Mr Menzies
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 937–42
Questions
UN Special Commission on Iraq 14–5

Campbell-Savours, Mr Dale
Debates etc.
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 679
Oral questions, Points of order (05.11.97) 333
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1049, 1052, 1054–5, 1057
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 328
Questions
British Cattle Movement Service 545w
Business questions 1041–2
Iraq, Armed forces deployment 582
Millennium Fund 406w
Smoking related diseases, Costs 537–8w

Canary Wharf
International conferences 617w

Canavan, Mr Dennis
Questions
Extradition 264w
International Court of Justice, Nuclear weapons 637w
Scottish Parliament 107–8

Cancer
see (also) Breast cancer

Cancer
Drugs 664w

Cannabis
Drug abuse 74w
Medical research 659w

Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group
see National Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group

Capital punishment
Algeria 389–90w

Capital receipts initiative
63w.
London boroughs 65w
Scotland 575w
Wales 303

Capitation Formula Review Group
Northern Ireland health and social services boards 693–4w

Caplin, Mr Ivor
Questions
Local government reform, Government grants to local authorities 72–3w
NHS administration 536w

Car boot sales
Licensing 121w

Car sharing
696w

Carbon dioxide
Nuclear power 570w

Cardiff Bay barrage
237w

Career structure
Armed forces 110w

Caribbean
Bananas 93–4w, 133–4w, 589–90w

Cartoons
Television 565–6

Casale, Mr Roger
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 924, 961–4
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 625–7
Hospitals, South West London (14.11.97) 1211
Police (14.11.97) 1188–90

Cash, Mr William
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 719
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 916–7
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 345, 347
Questions
Scottish Executive, Council of Ministers 98–9

Cash limits
Cabinet Office 208–9w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 208w
Dept for Education and Employment 228–30w
Dept of Health 218–9w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 195–7w
Dept of Trade and Industry 240–1w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 201w
Government departments 621w
Home Office 209–10w
Ministry of Defence 252–3w
Office of Public Service 216w

***Cash limits**—continued*
Ordnance Survey 195w
Registry of Friendly Societies 223w
Scottish Office 230–2w
Treasury 223–4w
Treasury Solicitor's Dept 193w
Welsh Office 239–40w

Category A prisoners
415w

Catering
Planning permission 554w

Caton, Mr Martin
Questions
Education, Wales 298–9
Welsh Office, Cash limits 239–40w

Cattle
135w
Animal breeding 384
Beef 331w
Data banks 545w
Disease control 137w
Imports 513–4w
Northern Ireland 395–6w

Central banks
511–2w

Central government
Mass media 452w

Chairman of Committee of the Whole House
Debates etc.
Amendments and new clauses (03.11.97) 76

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Legislation 216w
Monitor Consultancy 463–4w

Chancellor of the Exchequer
see Treasury

Channel tunnel
Railway network 477w

Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996
Questions
Environment protection 279w
Government grants 477w

Chapman, Mr Ben
Questions
Arts 406w

Chapman, Sir Sydney,
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 593, 620–5
Police (14.11.97) 1137, 1179–82
Questions
Christianity, Millennium 16–7
Hussein, Saddam 1162
Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee 110

Charitable collections
557–9w

Charities
Investment income 355w

Chaytor, Mr David
Questions
Cannabis, Drug abuse 74w
GP fundholders 181w
Grant maintained schools 34w
NHS, Racial discrimination 539w

Chechnya
Kidnapping 389w

Chelmsford Borough Council
Advance corporation tax 480–1w

Cheltenham
A40 484w

Chemical weapons
Metropolitan Police 412w
Police equipment 316–7w, 459w
West Mercia Constabulary 412w

Cheques
EC countries 354w

Chernobyl
Nuclear accidents 593w

Cheshire
Warehouse parties 215w

Chidgey, Mr David
Questions
Hospital waiting lists 537w

Child care
529w
New deal for lone parents 633–4w

Child Support Agency
675w
Annual reports 299–300w

Child workers
Developing countries 91–2w, 896–7

Children
Advocacy 660–1w
Maintenance 189w
Medical treatments 680w
Northern Ireland 358–60w
Radio programmes 257w, 565
Trading standards 298w
Walking 696–7w

Children and Young Person's Act 1933
Questions
420–3w, 546w

Children in care
77w

Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995
Questions
358–60w

Children's rights
381w

China
Overseas trade 630–1w

Chinook helicopters
Air accidents 687w

Chiropody
661–2w, 681–2w

***Chisholm, Mr Malcolm**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Scottish Office*
Questions
Accounts Commission for Scotland, East Lothian District Council 575–6w
Agriculture, Scotland 155w
Association of Scottish Community Councils 655w
Billing, Scottish Office 46w
Caledonian MacBrayne 156w
Capital receipts initiative, Scotland 575w
Dounreay, Radioactive waste disposal 496w
Fish farming 657w
Fishing quotas, Scotland 153w
Forestry Commission, Scotland 155w
Greenhouse effect, Scottish Office 656w
Housing finance, Scotland 104–5
Ivermectin, Insecticides 656w
Local government constituencies, Scotland 47–8w
Local government corruption, Scotland 101
Local government finance, Scotland 100–1, 104

***Chisholm, Mr Malcolm**—continued*
Local government social services, Scotland 101
Local government staff, Scotland 105
Monitor Consultancy, Scottish Office 654–5w

Chope, Mr Christopher
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 863–4, 866, 868
Local Government (Contracts) Bill, Lords amendts (11.11.97) 811–2, 816
Road safety (05.11.97) 241–3
Questions
Government grants to local authorities 279–80w
Greater London Authority, Referendums 375w
Road transport, Private finance initiative 480w

Christianity
Millennium 16–8

Chronic fatigue syndrome
Medical research 182–3w

Church buildings
Millennium 559–60

Church Commissioners
Advance corporation tax 9w
Church property 10w
Investment 8–9w
Monsanto 10w

Church property
Church Commissioners 10w

Church schools
521–2w, 672w, 1032

Civil Aviation Authority
63w

Civil list
Ethnic minorities 464w

Civil proceedings
49–50w
Insurance 50–1w
Northern Ireland 695w

Civil servants' visits abroad
Dept for Education and Employment 530w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 553–4w
Home Office 643–4w
Ministry of Defence 495w
Scottish Office 656w
Welsh Office 520w

Civil service manpower
Crown Prosecution Service 391
Dept of Trade and Industry 45w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit 166w

Civil service pensions
344w

Civil service recruitment
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 498w

Clapham, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 351–6
Questions
Slavery 592w

Clappison, Mr James
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 860–3, 868
Questions
Army, Defence review 80w
Immigration controls, Reviews 21–2w

***Clappison, Mr James**—continued*
Paracetamol 657w
Paracetamol, Death 508–9w
Paracetamol, Suicide 508w
Political refugees, Czech Republic 18w
Probation officers, Professional qualifications 115–6w
Schools, Security 35w
Sentencing, Appeals 264w
Tourist industry, Minimum wage 560

Clark, Rt Hon Alan
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 837
Traffic lights (12.11.97) 871

***Clark, Rt Hon Dr David**, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster*
Questions
Admiralty House, Official hospitality 342–3w
Civil service pensions 344w
Government buildings 1–2w
Government buildings, Reading 2w
Government departments, Contracts for services 94–5w
Legislation, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 216w
Millennium compliance 95w
Millennium compliance, Government departments 96w, 627w
Ministers, Electronic mail 441w
Non-departmental public bodies, Accountability 463w
Office of Public Service, Cash limits 216w

Clarke, Mr Charles
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 728, 741, 791–4
Questions
Transport policy 310–1

Clarke, Mr Eric
Questions
Defence industries, Diversification 79w

Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 715, 729, 737–44, 747–50
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 324

***Clarke, Rt Hon Tom**, Minister for Film and Tourism, Dept for Culture Media and Sport*
Questions
Billing, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 353w
Film industry 405w
Hotels 568w
Legislation, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 465w
Millennium compliance, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 107–8w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 466w
Tourism, EC presidency 208w
Tourist industry, EC budget 513w
Tourist industry, EC Social Charter 561
Tourist industry, Minimum wage 560–2
Tourist industry, Welfare to work 107w, 567

Class sizes
666w
Primary education 155w

Clergy
Pensions 10w, 18
Retirement age 18

Clifton-Brown, Mr Geoffrey
Debates etc.
Anniversaries, Points of order (11.11.97) 707
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 729, 733
Housing construction (12.11.97) 857, 859
Questions
Church Commissioners, Advance corporation tax 9w
Fish farming 657w
Food standards 381
Gulf War syndrome 15
Ivermectin, Insecticides 656w
Legislation, Attorney General 115w
Legislation, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 216w
Legislation, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 465w
Legislation, Dept for Education and Employment 442–3w
Legislation, Dept for International Development 440w
Legislation, Dept of Health 345w
Legislation, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 273–4w
Legislation, Dept of Trade and Industry 401w
Legislation, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 265w
Legislation, Home Office 211w
Legislation, Lord Chancellor's Dept 428w
Legislation, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341w
Legislation, Ministry of Defence 317w
Legislation, Northern Ireland Office 395w
Legislation, Scottish Office 305w
Legislation, Treasury 355w
Legislation, Welsh Office 306–7w
Magistrates' courts, Stow-on-the-Wold 575
Prisons, Private finance initiative 154w
Windfall tax, Wales 237w

Climate Change Convention
268w
UK delegations 464w

Closed circuit television
Crime prevention 688w
Evidence 407w

Clubs
Noise control 147–8w
Tennis 466w

Clwyd, Ann
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 325
Questions
Arms exports, Wales 619w
Arms trade 627w
Arms trade, USA 615w, 620w
Battery hens, Animal welfare 382
Cosmetic surgery, Private health services 704–5
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 110w, 317w, 362w, 370w, 517–8w, 612–4w
Defence industries, Wales 619–20w
Export licensing, Compensation 568–9w
Export licensing, Data banks 569w
General practitioners, Wales 518w
Hawk aircraft, Indonesia 112w, 401w
Hospitals, Fire regulations 685w
Iraq, Sanctions 580–1
Legal aid 427w
Merthyr Cynon Valley health unit 236w
NATO 167–8w
NATO, Costs 112w
NHS finance, Wales 518w
Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe 169w

Clwyd, Ann—continued
Overseas aid 893
Parliamentary questions, Disclosure of information 121w
Welsh Office, Arms exports 518w

Coaker Mr Vernon
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 353, 361–2
Questions
Business, EC enlargement 126–7w
Child Support Agency, Annual reports 299–300w

Coal
40w
Air pollution 42–3w

Coal mine closures
245w

Coastal protection
Waveney 341w

Cohabitation
Adoption 74–5w

Cohen, Mr Harry
Questions
Accident and emergency departments, Community health services 349w
Amritsar massacre 175w
Banks, Nazi victims 402w
CABnet 2000 401–2w
Harrier aircraft, Air accidents 318w
M11, Road construction 546w
Metropolitan Police, Chemical weapons 412w
Mine Information and Training Centre 318w
Ministry of Defence, New deal for young unemployed 688w
National Audit Office, Disclosure of information 565w
Police custody, Death 412w
Sey, Ibrahima 459w
Wellingborough Prison, Death 414w
West Mercia Constabulary, Chemical weapons 412w

Colchester
Armed forces housing 361w
Prisons 118w, 689w
Telecommunications technology 493w

Cold weather payments
308, 456w, 595w

Coleraine
Police stations 8w

Collins, Mr Tim
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 913, 940, 977–82, 985
Questions
Arachnoiditis 433w, 596w
Myodil 596w, 658w

Colman, Mr Tony
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 651–4
River Thames, Sea navigation (05.11.97) 271–2
Questions
EC labour policy 441–2w

Colvin, Mr Michael
Questions
Defence land, Property transfer 316w
"Excellence in Schools White Paper" 34w
Firearms 24w
Handguns, Compensation 117–8w
Modern apprenticeships 528w

Colvin, Mr Michael—continued
Motor vehicles, Export credit guarantees 377–8w
Western European Armaments Organisation 253w

Commercial broadcasting
Radio 257w

Commission of the European communities
see European Commission

Common agricultural policy
330–1w, 377–9, 399w
Farm incomes 330w

Common fisheries policy
382–3
Treaty of Amsterdam 173w

Commonwealth
Bananas 388–9w
Yemen 385w

Commonwealth Centre
564w

Commonwealth Development Corporation
894–5

Commonwealth games
Manchester 312

Community care
47w
Blind 347w
Scottish Affairs Select Committee 575w

Community councils
Local government finance 655w

Community Fire Safety Task Force
212–3w

Community health services
Accident and emergency departments 349w
Finance 433w

Community hospitals
Cornwall 599w, 698
Devon 599w
Expenditure 599w
Hospital beds 600w
Nurses 601–2w

Community protection orders
310

"Community Protection Orders Consultation Paper"
212w

Companies
Voluntary work 682w

Company liquidations
Bank of Credit and Commerce International 124w

Competition Bill (HL) 1997/98
Questions
469–72w, 566w

Complaints against police
Lorry drivers 53w

Comptroller and Auditor General
see National Audit Office

Compulsory purchase
70w, 699–700w

Computer applications
Lotteries 639–40w

Computer privacy
461w

Concessionary television licences
467w, 563–4

Conditional fee agreements
Legal aid 52w, 427w, 429w, 573–5

Connarty, Mr Michael
Questions
Housing finance, Scotland 104–5
Overseas aid 894

Consultants
Millennium Exhibition 609–10w

Consumer protection
Pricing 243w

Contingency reserve
224w

Contracts
Health authorities 350w, 393w, 653w
Millennium Exhibition 451w, 534w

Contracts for services
Employment Service 160–1w
Government departments 94–5w
NHS Supplies Authority 661w
Police 560w

Convention on Simplified Extradition Procedure
Parliamentary scrutiny of EC law 648–9w

Convention Relating to Extradition Between Member States of the EU
Parliamentary scrutiny of EC law 648–9w

Cook, Frank
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 35–9, 41, 44, 47–9, 57, 59–63
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1082, 1084–7
Questions
NHS charges, Low incomes 218w

Cook, Rt Hon Robin, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 910–22, 924, 927
Questions
Government Communications Headquarters 390w
Government Communications Headquarters, Northern Ireland 265w
Government Communications Headquarters, Recruitment 265w

Cooper, Ms Yvette
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 344–5

Copyright
Data banks 571w

Copywatch
244w

Corbett, Mr Robin
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 30–1, 41
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 326

Corbyn, Mr Jeremy
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 589
Questions
Algeria, Human rights 170–1w
Antarctic, Ozone layer 266w
Antarctic Treaty 202w
Antarctic Treaty, Japan 202w
Australia, Ethnic groups 175w

Corbyn, Mr Jeremy—continued
Bananas, Imports 133–4w
Capital receipts initiative, London boroughs 65w
Council housing, Building repairs 145–6w
Cycleways, Greater London 60–1w
Cycling 60w
Czech Republic, Human rights 201w
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 113w, 253w
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Diplomatic relations 167w
Developing countries, Debts written off 262w
Discretionary student grants 310w, 443w
European fighter aircraft, Costs 111–2w
Ghana, Human rights 170w
Government buildings 1–2w
Greenhouse effect 65–6w
Gypsies, Eastern Europe 27–8w
Higher education admission 444w
Housing, London boroughs 65w
Howard, John 262w
Iraq, Turkey 583
Jobseeker's allowance 226–7w
Kenya, Human rights 176w
Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, Industrial disputes 297–8w
NATO 6–7
Pensions review 89–90w
Political refugees, Algeria 19w
Political refugees, Czech Republic 19–20w
Political refugees, Government grants to local authorities 75–6w
Political refugees, Immigrant detainees 18–20w
Priority routes, Road accidents 148w
Quadrant Catering 45w
Review of Health Care in London Independent Advisory Panel 77w
Road traffic, Greater London 151w
Social security benefits, Political refugees 85w, 190w
Space technology, Nuclear safety 378w
Sri Lanka, Peace negotiations 170w
Student grants, Costs 310w, 445w
Student loans 443w
Student loans, Non-payment 310w
Student numbers 310w
Trident, Costs 110–1w
Western Sahara, Referendums 176w

Cormack, Sir Patrick
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1105, 1110, 1121–6
Questions
House of Commons debates 110
House of Commons Works of Art Advisory Committee 122–3w

Cornwall
Community hospitals 599w, 698
GP fundholders 600w
Tin 124w

Corruption
EC action 691w

Corston, Jean
Questions
Malaria, Drugs 663w

Cortecs International
Porton Down 317w

Cosmetic surgery
Private health services 704–5

Cosmetics
Animal experiments 121w, 629w

Cost per pupil
669–71w

Cost per student
33w
Wales 238w

Cotter, Mr Brian
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 516–21
Questions
Millennium compliance, Government departments 627w

Council house rents
698w

Council housing
Bromsgrove 484–5w
Building repairs 145–6w
Greater London 145–6w
Property transfer 145w

Council of Ministers
11–4w, 560–1w
Codes of practice 561w
EC Social Charter 172w
Scottish Executive 98–9, 105–6

Council tax
London boroughs 546w

Counselling
Miscarriages of justice 462w

Countryside Council for Wales
238w

Countryside stewardship scheme
Access to countryside 339w
Arable farming 37w

Court of Appeal (Civil Division) Review
266–7w

Court rules and procedures
Young people 546w

Cousins, Mr Jim
Debates etc.
NHS, Freedom of expression (05.11.97) 366–73
Questions
Diets, Economic regions 385
Iran, Refugees 591w

Cranston, Mr Ross
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 724, 795–6
Questions
Slaughterhouses, Food hygiene 330w

Crawley Hospital
Hospital admissions 902

Credit
Low incomes 588w

Creutzfeldt-Jakob dementia
346w

Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Act 1997
Questions
101–2

Crime prevention
Closed circuit television 688w
Planning permission 275w
Summertime 119w

Crime victims
263w
Handicapped 181–2w
Mentally handicapped 287w

Crimes of violence
Health service staff 702–3
Northern Ireland 204w
Proscribed organisations 204w

Criminal injuries compensation
428w

Criminal injuries compensation scheme
690w

Criminal Justice Act 1982
Questions
419–20w

Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order 1997
Questions
358–60w

Criminal proceedings
Non-indictable offences (05.11.97) 337–42
Scotland 95

Crown Prosecution Service
391–4
Civil service manpower 391

Cryer, Mrs Ann
Questions
Development plans 274w

Cryer, Mr John
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1110–3
Questions
Inheritance tax, Tax thresholds 623w
Tax rates and bands 565w

Cuba
Foreign policy 165w
Revolutions 362w

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Questions
Bed and breakfast accommodation, Families 66–7w
Child care 529w
Children, Medical treatments 680w
Compulsory purchase 699–700w
Criminal injuries compensation 428w
Family income, Advisory services 64w
Handicapped children, Health education 680w
Mentally ill, Harassment 434–5w
Multilateral Agreement on Investment 629w
New deal for lone parents, Child care 633–4w
New deal for lone parents, West Midlands 633w
Pensions, Advisory services 595w
Pensions, Divorce 595w
Polling stations, Access to buildings 647w
Retirement pensions 594w
Retirement pensions, Women 594–5w
Smoking, Young people 698
Special education 702w
Stakeholder pensions 635w
Suicide 437w
Telecommunications industry, Regulatory systems 568w
VAT, Energy conservation 566w

Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr John, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 179, 181, 183–93
Questions
Beef 389
Beef, Farmers 387–8
Beef, Public opinion 387–8
Common agricultural policy 330w, 377–9
Common agricultural policy, Farm incomes 330w
Meat 388–9
Meat Hygiene Service 379–80
Sheep premiums 378–9

Currencies
Overseas trade 101–2w

Currency movements
625–6w

Curriculum
673–4w

Curry, Rt Hon David
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 944–7
Rural areas (04.11.97) 192–5

Cycleways
Greater London 60–1w

Cycling
60w, 605w
Staffordshire 605w
Wales 620w

Cystic fibrosis
Health services 661w

Czech Republic
Human rights 201w
Political refugees 18–20w

Dafis, Mr Cynog
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 249–53, 269
Questions
Environmental Audit Select Committee 288w
National Assembly of Wales, Education 299
Tuition fees 1021
Violence on television 465w

Dalyell, Mr Tam
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 911, 924–5, 927
Iraq, Points of order (10.11.97) 584
Iraq, Standing Order No 24 applications (04.11.97) 113
Lockerbie, Bombings (07.11.97) 543–58
Student grants (04.11.97) 133
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 327–8
Questions
Air accidents 366w
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council 342w
Birds, Nature conservation 619w
Cattle, Animal breeding 384
Edinburgh Royal Infirmary NHS Trust, Private finance initiative 47w
Fletcher, Yvonne, Police deaths on duty 122w
Forest protection, Guyana 4–5w
Heart diseases, Air pollution 348w
Iran, Diplomatic relations 14w
Iraq, USA 578–9
Lead pollution 366w
Lockerbie, Bombings 3–4w, 46w, 169–70w, 262w
Mercury, Air pollution 606–7w
Organ donors 663w
Papua New Guinea, Overseas aid 94w
Scottish Executive, Council of Ministers 105–6
Scottish Parliament, Health services 702
Western General Hospital NHS Trust, Private finance initiative 303w

Darling, Mr Alistair, Chief Secretary to the Treasury
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 711–24, 726, 731, 733

Darling, Mr Alistair—continued
Questions
Cash limits, Government departments 621w
Contingency reserve 224w
Economic and monetary union 100w
NHS finance 620w, 623w
Public expenditure 224w, 259w, 386–7w, 622–3w
Public expenditure, Supply estimates 224w
Public sector earnings 259w
Student loans 260w
Tax avoidance, Government departments 354–5w
Taxation, Treasury 258w
VAT, Government departments 354w

Darvill, Mr Keith
Debates etc.
Police (14.11.97) 1177–9
Questions
Health service staff, Industrial health and safety 538–9w

Data banks
Cattle 545w
Copyright 571w
Export licensing 569w
Sexual offences 212w
Transport infrastructure 696w

Davey, Mr Edward
Debates etc.
Hospitals, South West London (14.11.97) 1208–11
Police (14.11.97) 1185–8
Questions
Defence review 361w
Demolition, Town and country planning 551–2w
Derelict land 485–6w
Government Communications Headquarters, Recruitment 265w
Leasehold land, Sports facilities 678w
National Lottery, Sports facilities 466–7w
National Lottery, Tennis 466w
NHS, Public sector assets 347w
NHS trusts, Property transfer 347w
Physical education, Tennis 446w, 669w
Planning appeals, Land use 550w
Pricing, Consumer protection 243w
Sports Council for England, Planning permission 550–1w
Sri Lanka, Missing persons 265–6w
Tennis 466w
Tennis, Clubs 466w
Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 603–4w
Water meters 481–2w

Davey, Mrs Valerie
Questions
Planning permission, Catering 554w

Davidson, Mr Ian
Questions
Chronic fatigue syndrome, Medical research 182–3w
Scottish Affairs Select Committee, Community care 575w

Davies, Rt Hon Denzil
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 734–7
Questions
Economic and monetary union 506w
European Parliament elections 412–3w
Foreign investment in UK, Wales 297–8
Polling stations, Schools 375w

Davies, Mr Geraint
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 724, 727, 731, 734, 759–60, 775–6, 788
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 641–6
Police (14.11.97) 1143, 1147–8, 1152
Questions
Forest Service 205–6w
Stabilisation Force in Bosnia 83w

Davies, Mr Quentin
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 915–6, 941
Questions
Grantham Hospital 692–3

Davies, Rt Hon Ron, Secretary of State for Wales
Questions
Cardiff Bay barrage 237w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Welsh Office 520w
Countryside Council for Wales 238w
Employment opportunities, Wales 297
Foreign investment in UK, Wales 297–8
Legislation, Welsh Office 306–7w
Local government finance, Wales 237w
Millennium compliance, Welsh Office 130–1w
Ministers' visits abroad, Welsh Office 520w
Monitor Consultancy, Welsh Office 358w
National Assembly of Wales 299–302
National Assembly of Wales, Referendums 234–5w, 357–8w
Official hospitality, Welsh Office 519–20w
Parliamentary constituencies, Wales 237w
Publicity, Welsh Office 520–1w
Tax avoidance, Welsh Office 240w
Welsh assembly 234w
Welsh assembly, Costs 235w
Welsh Development Agency 297
Welsh Office, Cash limits 239–40w
Welsh Office, Ministerial policy advisors 302–3

Dawson, Mr Hilton
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 866
Road safety (05.11.97) 235–6
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Waste disposal 619w
Children in care 77w
Children's rights 381w
E coli, Lancaster 381
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 281w
Training and enterprise councils, Fraud 1022–3

Day, Mr Stephen
Questions
Bosnia-Herzegovina, Overseas aid 592w
Northern Ireland government 309

Day care of children
695

Death
Domestic gas appliances 559w
Paracetamol 508–9w
Police custody 412w
Wellingborough Prison 414w

Death rate
Elderly 220–1w
Hypothermia 220w
Weather 103w, 381–2w, 429–30w

Debts
Health authorities 185w, 684–6w

Debts—continued
NHS trusts 158w, 185w, 684–6w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards 206w
Northern Ireland health and social services trusts 205–6w

Debts written off
Developing countries 262w, 588w

Defence Codification Agency
319w

Defence equipment
251w
Exhibitions 110w, 113–4w, 253w, 317w, 362w, 370w, 517–8w, 612–4w
Trade fairs 692w

Defence expenditure
10, 83–4w
Bosnia-Herzegovina 5–6

Defence industries
4, 9
Diversification 79w, 113w
Technology transfer 4–5, 8
Wales 619–20w

Defence land
Hunting 325–9w, 451w
Property transfer 316w

Defence procurement
12, 251–2w
Batteries 79–80w
European fighter aircraft 111w
Hercules aircraft 256w
Military aircraft 255w
Trident 450w
Western European Union 252w

Defence research
Animal experiments 284w, 687w, 689–90w
Unidentified flying objects 450w
Vaccination 317w

Defence review
79–82w, 361w, 581w
Air force 8–9
Armed forces reserves 2–3
Army 80w
Foreign policy 11
Trident 4, 450w

Defence support agencies
311–6w

Degrees
1035–6

Delegated legislation
123w

Democracy
Burma 202w

Democratic Republic of the Congo
Diplomatic relations 167w
Refugees 167w

Demolition
Town and country planning 551–2w

Demonstrations
Northern Ireland 693w
Rostrevor 692w

Denham, Mr John, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Social Security
Questions
Benefit Fraud Inspectorate 454w
Cold weather payments 456w
Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Advertising controls 532w
Disability living allowance 250–1w

Denham, Mr John—continued
Disability living allowance, Benefit integrity project 301w
Disability living allowance, Social security appeals 632–4w
Elderly, Heating 595w
Incapacity benefit 455–6w
Incapacity benefit, Medical examinations 531w
Incapacity benefit, Social security appeals 531w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict, War pensions 301–2w
Members' correspondence, Dept of Social Security 248w
Minister for Women, Press releases 593–4w
Mobility allowance, Age 191–2w
National insurance contributions, Employers' contributions 455w
Noise Induced Hearing Loss and War Pensions Review Group 248w, 635w
Pensioners, Means tested benefits 249–50w
Pensions, Advisory services 595w
Pensions, Divorce 595w
Pensions, Social security reciprocal agreements 190–1w
Pensions review 89–90w
Retirement pensions 594w
Retirement pensions, Retail prices index 247w
Retirement pensions, Women 594–5w
Stakeholder pensions 635w
Taxable benefits, Tax yields 454–5w
Welfare to work, Handicapped 452–3w

Dental services
535w
North Staffordshire 430–1w
Patients 182w
Shropshire 536w
Swindon 706
West Midlands 430–1w

Dentists
Wales 129w

Departmental correspondence
5w, 459w, 501–2w, 646w
Black Country Development Corporation 70w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit 167w

Departmental responsibilities
Legislation 262–3w

Deportation
Elderly 22–3w
Illegal immigrants' 368–9w
Immigrants' dependants 22w
Political refugees 209w, 369w

Dept for Culture Media and Sport
Billing 353w
Cash limits 208w
Greenhouse effect 677–8w
Legislation 465w
Members' correspondence 108w
Millennium compliance 107–8w
Monitor Consultancy 466w

Dept for Education and Employment
Cash limits 228–30w
Civil servants' visits abroad 530w
Legislation 442–3w
Members' correspondence 164w
Millennium compliance 163–4w
Monitor Consultancy 446–7w
Official hospitality 530w
Publicity 530–1w
Tax avoidance 227w
Taxation 227–8w

Dept for International Development
Legislation 440w
Millennium compliance 92–3w

Dept for the Environment Transport and the Regions
see Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions

Dept of Health
Cash limits 218–9w
Legislation 345w
Members' correspondence 186w
Millennium compliance 185–6w
Ministers' visits abroad 544w
Monitor Consultancy 437–8w
Press releases 659w
Public expenditure 184w
Tax assessment 184w
Tax avoidance 219w
Taxation 219w

Dept of Social Security
Developing countries trade 636w
Government contracts 248–9w
Members' correspondence 248w
Millennium compliance 189–90w
Ministers' visits abroad 532w
Monitor Consultancy 377w
Press releases 593–4w
Public expenditure 247w
Tax avoidance 247w
Taxation 247w

Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Billing 70w
Cash limits 195–7w
Civil servants' visits abroad 553–4w
Greenhouse effect 552–3w
Legislation 273–4w
Members' correspondence 151–2w
Millennium compliance 149–51w
Ministers' visits abroad 479w
Monitor Consultancy 367w
Official hospitality 138w
Public appointments 273w
Tax avoidance 195w
Taxation 194w

Dept of Trade and Industry
Billing 296w
Cash limits 240–1w
Civil service manpower 45w
Greenhouse effect 571w
Legislation 401w
Members' correspondence 401w
Millennium compliance 126w, 244w, 298w
Orders and regulations 43–4w
Tax avoidance 402w
Taxation 627–9w

Derby City Council
Revenue support grant 197w

Derbyshire
Educational finance 141–2w
NHS finance 906
School meals 161–2w

Derbyshire Constabulary
Revenue support grant 210w

Derbyshire County Council
Revenue support grant 197w

Derelict land
485–6w

Detention centres
Northern Ireland 293–4w

Developing countries
Child workers 91–2w, 896–7
Debts written off 262w, 588w
Small businesses 592–3w
World Bank 590–1w

Developing countries trade
Attorney General 684w
Dept of Social Security 636w
Lord Chancellor's Dept 638–9w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 618w
Prime Minister 617w
Scottish Office 655w
Treasury 625w
Welsh Office 573–4w

"Developing Emergency Services in the Community Final Report"
349w

Development aid
306, 313–4

Development Assistance Committee
Women 590w

Development plans
57w, 274w

Devolution
Scotland 154w

Devon
Assisted places scheme 226w
Community hospitals 599w
GP fundholders 600w

***Dewar, Rt Hon Donald**, Secretary of State for Scotland*
Questions
Alcohol and crime, Scotland 102
Appropriate adults, Scotland 95–6
Campbell, Jason, Prisoners' transfers 96, 303–4w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Scottish Office 656w
Criminal proceedings, Scotland 95
Developing countries trade, Scottish Office 655w
Economic and monetary union, Scotland 99
Government contracts, Scottish Office 302–3w
Legislation, Scottish Office 305w
MFV Sapphire, Scotland 99–100
Millennium compliance, Scottish Office 158–9w
Prison population, Scotland 101–2
Prisoners, Scotland 305w
Prisoners' transfers, Northern Ireland 304–5w
Public expenditure, Scotland 155w
Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum 355–6w
Scottish Council for Educational Technology, Efficiency scrutinies 356–7w
Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission 96
Scottish Executive, Council of Ministers 98–9
Scottish Office, Cash limits 230–2w
Scottish Prison Service, Recruitment 305w
Skye bridge 103–4
Tax avoidance, Scottish Office 233w
Taxation, Scottish Office 232–3w
University finance, Scotland 100

Diabetes
Medical equipment 187w

Diesel fuel
Government assistance 138w

Diets
Economic regions 385

Dioxins
Bolsover 330–1w

Diplomatic relations
Democratic Republic of the Congo 167w
Iran 14w

Dir90/220/EEC
554w

Dir94/33/EC
217–8w

Director General of Fair Trading
see Office of Fair Trading

Director General of Water Services
see Office of Water Services

Directors
Housing Corporation 484w
NHS trusts 380–1w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards 588w

Disability Discrimination Act 1995
Questions
Advertising controls 532w

Disability living allowance
250–1w
Benefit integrity project 301w
Social security appeals 632–4w

Disasters
Montserrat 266w, 498–9w, 588–9w, 891–2

Discretionary student grants
310w, 443w, 1034

Disease control
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 332–3w, 342w, 365w
Cattle 137w
Infectious diseases 350–1w

Dismore, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Fire services, Greater London (06.11.97) 473–4
Legal aid scheme (05.11.97) 288–9
Questions
Betting and gaming duties 623–4w
Betting and gaming duties, Tax yields 624w
Criminal injuries compensation scheme 690w
Crown Prosecution Service 391–2
"Excellence in Schools White Paper" 668w
Gaming Act 1968 461w
Gaming Board for Great Britain, Public appointments 25w
Gaming clubs, Advertising controls 459–60w
Gaming clubs, Licensing 460w, 624w
Gaming clubs, Trade unions 460w
Noise Induced Hearing Loss and War Pensions Review Group 248w, 635w
Political refugees, Barnet 209w
Public Health Laboratory Service 179–80w
Public telephones 56–7w
Railway travel, Mill Hill Broadway 139w
Sheltered housing, Finance 246w, 456–8w

Divorce
Pensions 595w

***Dobson, Rt Hon Frank**, Secretary of State for Health*
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Ministerial statements (03.11.97) 19–28
Questions
Blood transfusion services, North West region 706
Community hospitals, Cornwall 698
Dept of Health, Cash limits 218–9w
Grantham Hospital 692–3
Health service staff 703
Health service staff, Crimes of violence 702–3
Hospital waiting lists 697–8

Dobson, Rt Hon Frank—continued
National Blood Transfusion Service, Performance standards 705–6
NHS, Pay 695–7
NHS finance, Leicestershire 693
NHS finance, Trent 691
Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals NHS Trust 691–2
Scottish Parliament, Health services 702

Doctors' list of patients
Wales 50w

Domestic gas appliances
Death 559w

Donohoe, Mr Brian H
Questions
NHS trusts, Scotland 106–7

Doran, Mr Frank
Questions
Community care 47w
Electorate, Scotland 574–5w
Local government constituencies, Scotland 47–8w
Post-operative care, Scotland 48w

Dorneywood
Official hospitality 18w

Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 118–27, 134, 166
Questions
Schools 1029–30
Student grants 1022

Dounreay
Radioactive waste disposal 386–7, 496w

Dover
Ports (11.11.97) 817–24

Drama education
Student grants 672w

Drew, Mr David
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 846–50
Rural areas (04.11.97) 203, 206–7
Questions
Health services, Finance 534w
New deal for young unemployed 1024–5

Drinking and driving
485w
EC action 269w
Road accidents 480w

Driving licences
Elderly 275w

Driving offences
EC action 690–1w

Drown, Ms Julia
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 859–61
Questions
Dental services, Swindon 706
New deal for young unemployed 1032–3

Drug abuse
115w
Cannabis 74w
Prisons 415w

Drug crimes
Eurostar 691–2w

Drug industry
217w

Drugs
Cancer 664w
Malaria 663w

Drugs Czar
see UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator

Drunkenness
Armed forces 79w

Dry stone walls
270w

Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Questions
Benefit Fraud Inspectorate 454w
Cold weather payments 456w
Home energy efficiency scheme 486–7w
Incapacity benefit 455–6w
New deal for lone parents 300w, 376–7w
Welfare to work, Handicapped 452–3w

Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Questions
Air fares, Pricing 241–2w
Backbenchers 108–9
Competition Bill (HL) 1997/98 469–72w
Cycling 60w
Fire prevention, Hotels 23w
Immigration appeals 573
London Underground, Private investment 67w
National Audit Office, Private finance initiative 16
Railway industry, Government grants 67–8w
Tourism, EC presidency 208w
Train operating units, Performance standards 139w

Duty free allowances
260w

E coli
Lancaster 381

Eagle, Angela, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 210–3
Questions
Access to countryside 58w, 604w
Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification, Business interests 71w
Asbestos 57w
Billing, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 70w
Black Country Development Corporation, Departmental correspondence 70w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Industrial health and safety 280w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 553–4w
Climate Change Convention 268w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions, Official hospitality 138w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions, Public appointments 273w
Dry stone walls 270w
Forests 493–4w
Formaldehyde, Health hazards 142–4w
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 152w, 281w, 554w
Genetically modified organisms, Seeds 71w
Greenhouse effect 53–4w, 65–6w, 604–6w
Greenhouse effect, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 552–3w
Hazardous wastes, Refuse disposal 31w
Health action zones 482w
Hedges and ditches 149–50w
Home energy efficiency scheme 486–7w
Land pollution, Radioactivity 274w
Lead pollution 366w
Legislation, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 273–4w
Lighting, Pollution control 272w

Eagle, Angela—continued
Members' correspondence, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 151–2w
Mercury, Air pollution 606–7w
Millennium compliance, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 149–51w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 367w
National parks 278–9w
Noise control, Clubs 147–8w
Nuclear safety, EC law 485w
Office of Water Services, Public appointments 603w
Packaging, Recycling 489–90w
Paper, Recycling 489w
Paper industry, Waste disposal 147w
Polymers, Food 483w
Public footpaths 279w
Public footpaths, Local authority powers 279w
Radioactive waste disposal 55–6w
Recycling 491–2w
Recycling, Air pollution control 490–1w
Rivers, Safety measures 138w
Rural areas 270w
"Rural England White Paper" 138w
Sellafield, Radioactive waste disposal 55w
Sewage 271w, 365w
Sewage, Floods 270–1w, 550w
Sites of special scientific interest 58w
Sites of special scientific interest, Thorne Moors 58w
Solar power 148w
Tax avoidance, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 195w
Taxation, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 194w
Tipping of waste 487–8w, 553w
Tipping of waste, Methane 487w
Waste disposal 488w
Water meters 481–2w
Wood, Health hazards 142–5w
Zoos, EC action 149w
Zoos, Licensing 607–8w

Early retirement
Teachers 310w, 446w

Earnings rules
635–6w
War pensions 84w
War widows' pensions 84w

East Lancashire
Housing stock 695–6w

East Lothian District Council
Accounts Commission for Scotland 575–6w

East Midlands Airport
Immigration officers 371w

East Surrey Health Authority
535w

East Sussex
Roads (04.11.97) 221–8

Eastern Arts Board
405w

Eastern Europe
Gypsies 27–8w

EC action
Arms trade 169w
Biotechnology 572w
Corruption 691w
Drinking and driving 269w
Driving offences 690–1w
Exhaust emissions 271w
Gibraltar 391w

EC action—continued
Millennium compliance 468w
Organised crime 690–1w
Regional planning and development 555w
Science and technology research (11.11.97) 816
Zoos 149w

EC Agriculture Council
235w

EC budget
Economic and monetary union 99w
Fishery agreements 35–6w
Tourist industry 513w

EC Commission
see European Commission

EC common foreign and security policy
Voting methods 172–3w

EC countries
Cheques 354w
Foreign workers 309w
Judiciary 391w
Police 391w
Research 306
Road freight transport 53w, 267–8w
Tax harmonisation 258w, 509w
Trade unions 311w
Tuition fees 398w
Visas 392w

EC Draft 7310/97
(11.11.97) 816

EC Draft 9507/97
46w

EC Draft 10385/97
(11.11.97) 816

EC Energy Council
299w

EC enlargement
Business 126–7w

EC external trade
Livestock 340w

EC Finance Council
16–8w, 504w

EC Fisheries Council
36–7w

EC Foreign Affairs Council
561–3w

EC grants and loans
Organic farming 234w

EC Labour and Social Affairs Council
527–8w

EC labour policy
441–2w, 504w

EC law
Environmental impact assessment 555w
European Court of Justice 691w
European Police Office 691w
Gibraltar 391w
Nuclear safety 485w
Publicity 207w
Scottish Parliament 157w

EC presidency
385w, 389w
Tourism 208w

EC Social Affairs Council
see EC Labour and Social Affairs Council

EC Social Charter
306–8, 310–2, 314
Council of Ministers 172w
Tourist industry 561

EC Transport Council
193–4w

Economic and monetary union
100w, 223w, 506w
EC budget 99w
Ministerial policy advisors 221–2w
Newspaper press 223w
Official publications 626w
Public sector debt 504–5w
Publicity 221w
Scotland 99

Economic policy
104–7w

Edinburgh Royal Infirmary NHS Trust
Private finance initiative 47w

Education
Millennium 465w
National Assembly of Wales 299
Wales 298–9

Education of children at home
443–4w

Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989
Questions
358–60w

Education (Student Loans) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 76–85

Education vouchers
Local government finance 147w

Educational assessment
665w

Educational finance
32w, 1023–4
Derbyshire 141–2w
Wales 128w

Educational qualifications
Medical students 159–60w

Educational standards
665w, 700w

Edwards, Mr Huw
Questions
Defence expenditure 10
Gwent levels, Nature reserves 517w
Monetary compensatory amounts 513w
Pre-school education, Wales 236w

Efficiency scrutinies
355–6w
Scottish Council for Educational Technology 356–7w

Efford, Mr Clive
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 658–61

826 squadron
576–7w

Elderly
Death rate 220–1w
Deportation 22–3w
Driving licences 275w
Heating 595w
Weather 601w

Election expenditure
901–3

Electorate
Scotland 574–5w

Electricity meters
Post offices 573w

Electricity tariffs
Northern Ireland 394w

Electronic mail
Lord Chancellor's Dept 679w

Electronic mail—continued
Ministers 441w
President of the Council 609w

"Eliminating World Poverty White Paper"
(05.11.97) 315–32

Ellman, Mrs Louise
Debates etc
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 910–1
Questions
Health service staff, Crimes of violence 702–3

Emergency Communications Ad Hoc Working Party
648w

Emergency planning
Nuclear weapons 580–1w
Telephone systems 648w, 650–1w

Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1062, 1078, 1082–4
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1049–50

Employers' contributions
National insurance contributions 455w

Employment discrimination
Armed forces 613w

Employment opportunities
Rural transport 1024
Wales 297

Employment policy
128w

Employment Service
Annual reports 382–4w
Contracts for services 160–1w
Portsmouth 160–1w

Employment zones
308w

Energy conservation
VAT 511w, 566w, 625w

English National Opera
353w
Royal Opera House 610w

Ennis, Mr Jeff
Questions
Adult education 1031–2
Athletics, Training 564
Regional planning and development, EC action 555w

Entry clearances
Immigration rules 211–2w

Environment Act 1995
Questions
274w

Environment protection
Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996 279w
Northern Ireland 394w

Environment Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee
112

Environmental Audit Select Committee
288w, 609w, (10.11.97) 683, (12.11.97) 1007

Environmental education
666w

Environmental health
536w, 700–1

Environmental impact assessment
EC law 555w

Environmental policy
Cabinet committees 60w, 546w

Equal Opportunities Unit
Metropolitan Police 461–2w

Equal pay
Treaty of Amsterdam 172w

Erb's palsy
345w

Essex
Housing construction 554w, 697–8w
Magistrates' courts (10.11.97) 684–90
Population 697–9w
Prisons 419w
Road construction (12.11.97) 875–80

Essex County Council
Advance corporation tax 480–1w

Etherington, Bill
Questions
Advance directives 267w
Export of live animals 398–9w, 514w
Export of live animals, Horses 399w
River Wear, Ports 402w
Zoos, Licensing 607–8w

Ethiopia
Overseas aid 93w

Ethnic groups
Australia 175w
Welfare to work 442w

Ethnic minorities
Civil list 464w
Government grants to local authorities 644w
Police 462–4w
Tower Hamlets 644w

Euro
Costs 512w

European Commission
392w

European Commission budget
103w

European Communities
see (also) EC headings

European Communities
392w

European Communities (Amendment) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R (12.11.97) 910–1007
Questions
172w

European Communities (Recognition of Professional Qualifications) Regulations 1991
Questions
473w

European Council
Codes of practice 561w

European Court of Human Rights
390w

European Court of Justice
171w, 390w
EC law 691w
Jurisdiction 171w
Public appointments 501w
Treaty of Amsterdam 500–1w

European currency unit
98w, 259w
Design 505w

European fighter aircraft
8–9, 11–2, 78w, 111w, 254–5w, 615w
Costs 111–2w
Defence procurement 111w

European Movement
UK contributions 14w, 175w

European Parliament
Treaty of Amsterdam 172w

European Parliament elections
412–3w

European Police Office
EC law 691w
Immunity from prosecution 558w

European strategic programme for research in information
Schools 245w

Eurostar
Drug crimes 691–2w
Immigration controls 691–2w
Passengers 477w

Evans, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 263–6, 270
Business questions (06.11.97) 402–3
Housing construction (12.11.97) 850–3
Questions
Concessionary television licences 563–4
Death rate, Elderly 220–1w
Death rate, Hypothermia 220w
Death rate, Weather 381–2w, 429–30w
Defence industries 9
EC countries, Research 306
Foreign investment in UK, Wales 298
Hospital admissions, Weather 539–42w
Overseas aid 592w
Student numbers 666w

Evidence
Closed circuit television 407w
Disclosure of information 374w

Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Debates etc.
Education (Student Loans) Bill, Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 82
Questions
Elderly, Heating 595w
Elderly, Weather 601w
Fish, Food standards 381
Fishing quotas, Scotland 153w
MFV Sapphire, Scotland 99–100
NATO, Nuclear weapons policy 7
UN Special Commission on Iraq 581

"Excellence For All Children Consultation Paper"
Video recordings 309–10w

"Excellence in Schools White Paper"
34w, 668w, 673–4w
Exchange rate mechanism 223w

Exchange rates
Sterling 16w

Exclusion orders
288w

Exhaust emissions
EC action 271w

Exhibitions
Defence equipment 110w, 113–4w, 253w, 317w, 362w, 370w, 517–8w, 612–4w
Ministry of Defence 612–3w

Export credit
Arms exports 245–6w

Export credit guarantees
46w

Export credit guarantees*—*continued
Motor vehicles 377–8w

Export Credits Guarantee Dept
Arms exports 242w

Export Forum Working Group
127–8w

Export licensing
Arms exports 7–8, 614w, 629–30w
Compensation 568–9w
Data banks 569w

Export of live animals
398–9w, 514w, 618w
Horses 399w
Inspections 340–1w
Sheep 135w, 618w

Exports
Beef 233–4w

External financing limits
British Railways Board 193w

Extradition
264w
Levitt, Roger 403w

Eyesight
Road accidents 366w

Faber, Mr David
Debates etc.
Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill (HL), 2R (06.11.97) 458–61
Questions
Cuba, Revolutions 362w
Montserrat, Ships 896
UNESCO 439–40w

Fabricant, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill (HL), 2R (06.11.97) 456, 462–4
Oral question time intervention (13.11.97) 1028
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1055
Questions
Beef, Cattle 331w
Millennium, Church buildings 559–60

Facsimile transmission
45w

Fallon, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 349–53
Questions
Armed forces recruitment 78w
British Nuclear Fuels 379w
EC Social Charter 310
Labour Party, Finance 902–3
Local government staff, Scotland 105

Families
311, 506w
Bed and breakfast accommodation 66–7w

Family benefits
Social security benefits reductions 84–5w

Family income
Advisory services 64w

Family premium
Lone parents 88–9w

Farm incomes
Common agricultural policy 330w

Farmers
Beef 387–8

Farms
Furs 137w

***Fatchett, Mr Derek**, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office*
Questions
Algeria, Capital punishment 389–90w
Algeria, Human rights 170–1w
Amritsar massacre 175w
Australia, Ethnic groups 175w
Australia, Republicanism 202w
BBC external services 392–3w
Burma, Democracy 202w
Burma, Human rights 15w
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 362w
Departmental correspondence 501–2w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Cash limits 201w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Members' constituency work 171w
Greenhouse effect, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 637w
Hussein, Saddam 578
Immigration, Members' correspondence 200–1w
Immigration applications, Administrative delays 497w
Indonesia, Military vehicles 266w
Iran, Diplomatic relations 14w
Iraq, Armed forces deployment 582
Iraq, Mass media 582
Iraq, Sanctions 579–81, 583
Iraq, Turkey 583
Iraq, USA 578–9
Islands, Sea level 168–9w
Israel, Army 165–6w
Members' correspondence 14–5w, 362w
Middle East, Peace negotiations 498w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Administrative delays 11w, 387w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Civil service manpower 166w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Complaints 166w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Departmental correspondence 167w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Members' correspondence 11w, 166w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Vacancies 11w
Millennium compliance, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 173–5w
Republic of Ireland, Passports 199w
Sri Lanka, Missing persons 265–6w
Sri Lanka, Peace negotiations 170w
Sudan, National service 560w
Sudan, Peace negotiations 560w
Thailand, Visas 165w
UK passport holders, Republic of Ireland 407w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 577–83
Visas, Administrative delays 361–2w
Western Sahara, Referendums 176w

Feltham Young Offender Institution and Remand Centre
Prison discipline 119w

Festivals and special occasions
United Nations 169w

***Field, Rt Hon Frank**, Minister of State, Dept of Social Security*
Questions
Dept of Social Security, Press releases 594w
Dept of Social Security, Public expenditure 247w
Developing countries trade, Dept of Social Security 636w
Government contracts, Dept of Social Security 248–9w

***Field, Rt Hon Frank**—continued*
Ministers' visits abroad, Dept of Social Security 532w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept of Social Security 377w
Social security, Interest groups 454w
Tax avoidance, Dept of Social Security 247w
Taxation, Dept of Social Security 247w

Film industry
405w
Manpower 571w

Finance and Services Select Committee
(14.11.97) 1207

Finance Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 400
Questions
Legislative process 108

"Financial Statement and Budget Report November 1997"
511w

Financial targets
British Nuclear Fuels 295w

Fire prevention
Hotels 23w

Fire regulations
Hospitals 685w

Fire services
375w
Greater London (06.11.97) 467–80

Fire Services Act 1947
Debates etc.
(06.11.97) 467–80

Firearms
24w

Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997
Questions
418w

Firearms (Amendment) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
Lords amendts (03.11.97) 30–75

Fish
Food standards 381

Fish conservation
332w, 515w

Fish farming
657w

***Fisher, Mr Mark**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Culture Media and Sport*
Questions
Concessionary television licences 467w
Eastern Arts Board 405w
English National Opera, Royal Opera House 610w
Greenhouse effect, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 677–8w
HMS Cavalier 567w
Hotels, Television licences 468w
Jazz 406w
Museums and galleries 405w
Museums and galleries, Minimum wage 562–3
National Lottery, Primary education 2–3w
National Railway Museum, Locomotives 610w
Opera 406w
Public libraries, Publicity 466w
Radio, Commercial broadcasting 257w
Radio broadcasting licences, West Midlands 404w
Radio programmes, Children 257w, 565

***Fisher, Mr Mark**—continued*
Sports, Television 465w
Telecommunications industry, Regulatory systems 568w
Television, Cartoons 565–6
Violence on television 465w

Fishery agreements
EC budget 35–6w

Fishing quotas
383–4
Scotland 153w

Fishing vessels
Multiannual guidance programme 134w

Fishing Vessels (Decommissioning) Scheme 1997
Debates etc.
(12.11.97) 1007

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Debates etc.
Fire services, Greater London (06.11.97) 470–2
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 661–4, 669

Flags
Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust 6w

Fletcher, Yvonne
Police deaths on duty 122w

Flight, Mr Howard
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 794–5
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 990–1
Questions
Church Commissioners, Advance corporation tax 9w
Diesel fuel, Government assistance 138w
Lorry drivers, Complaints against police 53w
Personal savings, Taxation 100w, 355w
Referendums, Scotland 155w
Road freight transport, Compensation 52–3w
Road freight transport, EC countries 53w, 267–8w

Flint, Caroline
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 26
Private roads (03.11.97) 86–90
Questions
Coal 40w
NHS administration 693–4
Sites of special scientific interest 58w
Sites of special scientific interest, Thorne Moors 58w

Floods
Sewage 270–1w, 550w

Fluoridation
379w

Flynn, Paul
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 27
Business questions (06.11.97) 399–400
Questions
Admiralty House, Official hospitality 342–3w
Animal experiments 282–6w
Animal experiments, Cosmetics 121w
Animal experiments, Defence research 284w, 687w
Animal experiments, Informative labelling 629w
Animal experiments, Research finance 284w

Flynn, Paul—*continued*
Animal experiments, Training 284–5w
Animal welfare 127w
Armed forces, Drunkenness 79w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Industrial health and safety 280w
Cancer, Drugs 664w
Church Commissioners, Investment 8–9w
Cycling, Wales 620w
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 113–4w
Defence land, Hunting 325–9w, 451w
Dorneywood, Official hospitality 18w
Drug abuse 115w
Foreign investment in UK, Wales 237w
Furs, Farms 137w
Genetic engineering, Research 664w
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 152w
Hedges and ditches 149w
Hospital doctors, Performance appraisal 536w
Hospitals, Paint 350–1w
Huntingdon Life Sciences, Animal experiments 647w
Millennium Exhibition, Police 610w
National parks 278–9w
Police, Performance standards 559–60w
Police discipline 372–3w
Poultry, Animal welfare 137w
Prime Minister, Interest groups 675w
Racial harassment 286w
Road tolls 366–7w
Royal yacht 361w
Sentencing, Appeals 390–1
Spain, Bulls 175w
Surgery 380w
Thalidomide 663–4w
Transplant surgery, Research 351–2w
UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator 257–8w
Weapons 615w
Xenotransplantation 664w
Zoos, EC action 149w

Follett, Barbara
Questions
General Certificate of Secondary Education, New towns 523–6w
Higher education 1019–20
In vitro fertilisation 379w

Food
Polymers 483w

Food consumption
Beef 516w

Food contamination
Pesticide residues 35w
Scotland (06.11.97) 466

Food hygiene
Slaughterhouses 330w

Food industry
131w

Food labelling
339w

Food Protection (Emergency Prohibitions) (Oil and Chemical Pollution of Fish) Order 1997
Debates etc.
(06.11.97) 466

Food standards
381
Beef 380–1
Fish 381

Football
405–7w

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Cash limits 201w
Civil service recruitment 498w

Foreign and Commonwealth Office—*continued*
Greenhouse effect 637w
Legislation 265w
Members' constituency work 171w
Members' correspondence 171w
Millennium compliance 173–5w
Ministers' visits abroad 502–4w
Tax avoidance 636w

Foreign investment in UK
North Wales 129–30w
Wales 237w, 297–8

Foreign policy
Belarus 199w
Cuba 165w
Defence review 11
France 175–6w
Ghana 170w

Foreign workers
EC countries 309w

Foreigners
Royal Fleet Auxiliary 82w

Forest fires
Indonesia 439w

Forest protection
Guyana 4–5w

Forest Service
205–6w

Forestry Commission
Fox hunting 38w
Scotland 155w

Forests
493–4w

Formaldehyde
Health hazards 142–4w

Former Prime ministers
385w

Forth, Mr Eric
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 714, 716–7
Business questions (06.11.97) 402
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 932–7, 939, 945, 947–8, 952, 954
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 586–7
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 677–8, 680, 682
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1067–9
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1050–6
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 407, 412, 415, 421–3, 434, 438–40, 452–3
Questions
All party groups 217w
Business questions 1042
Graduates 556w
Museums and galleries, Minimum wage 562
Overseas investment 507w
Trade unions, EC countries 311w

Fossil fuel levy
Nuclear power (05.11.97) 343–64

Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL) 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R (05.11.97) 343–64

Foster, Mr Don
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 124, 135–9
Questions
Educational standards 700w

Foster, Mr Don—*continued*
Headteachers, Vacancies 700–1w
Overseas students, Student numbers 310w, 444–5w
Political parties, Finance 1026
Pre-school education, Pupil-teacher ratios 33w
Pre-school education, School population 33–4w
Teachers, Early retirement 310w, 446w
Teachers, Redundancy 310w, 445–6w

Foster, Mr Michael John, (Worcester)
Questions
Meat Hygiene Service 379–80

Foulkes, Mr George, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development
Questions
Caribbean, Bananas 589–90w
Indonesia, Forest fires 439w
Know-how Fund 589w
Legislation, Dept for International Development 440w
Montserrat, Disasters 588–9w
Montserrat, Overseas aid 441w, 895
Montserrat, Refugees 895–6
Montserrat, Ships 896
Overseas aid 893–4
Overseas aid, Personal loans 588w
Overseas aid, Welfare to work 889
Palestinians, Overseas aid 897
Palestinians, Overseas investment 897–8
Somalia, Overseas aid 894
UNESCO 439–40w
Windward Islands, Technical assistance 440–1w

Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 595–601

Fox, Dr Liam
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 406
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 998
Questions
Currency movements 625–6w
Overseas trade, Currencies 101–2w
Political refugees, Deportation 209w
University finance, Scotland 100

Fox hunting
Forestry Commission 38w

France
Foreign policy 175–6w
Industrial disputes 52–3w, 552w

Fraser, Mr Christopher
Debates etc.
Minister Without Portfolio, Points of order (10.11.97) 584
Poole Harbour bridge (12.11.97) 1012
Questions
Millennium Exhibition, Construction 451w

Fraud
Immigration applications 651–2w
Training and enterprise councils 1022–3

Free trade
889–90

Freedom of expression
NHS (05.11.97) 366–76

Freemasonry
418w

Freight facilities grant
486w

Funerals
Princess of Wales 3w

Furs
Farms 137w

Further education
903, 1021–2

Further education colleges
Per capita costs 525–6w
Vocational education 309w

Future large aircraft
255w

Fyfe, Maria
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 322
Questions
Food labelling 339w
Free trade 890
Lone parents, Social security claims 676–7w
Pre-school education, Scotland 154w

Galbraith, Mr Sam, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Scottish Office
Questions
Beta-interferon, Expenditure 46–7w
Community care 47w
Edinburgh Royal Infirmary NHS Trust, Private finance initiative 47w
Health authorities, Contracts 653w
Health education, Glasgow 153w
Health services, Scotland 653–4w
Hospitals, Private finance initiative 103
NHS administration, Scotland 107
NHS finance, Scotland 156w
NHS trusts, Debts 158w
NHS trusts, Scotland 106–7
Post-operative care, Scotland 48w
Residential care, Scotland 156w
Scottish Affairs Select Committee, Community care 575w
Scottish health boards, Bureaucracy 154w
Scottish health boards, Finance 232w
Scottish National Sleep Laboratory 654w
Social services, Inter agency cooperation 682–3w
Western General Hospital NHS Trust, Private finance initiative 303w

Gale, Mr Roger
Questions
Concessionary television licences 564
Grant maintained schools 448w
Housing benefits, Interest payments 300w
Political refugees, Deportation 369w

Gaming Act 1968
Questions
461w

Gaming Board for Great Britain
Public appointments 25w

Gaming clubs
Advertising controls 459–60w
Licensing 460w, 624w
Trade unions 460w

Gapes, Mr Mike
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 405
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 948–51, 953–4
Questions
Caribbean, Bananas 590w
Grant maintained schools, School admission 667w
Montserrat, Refugees 895–6
Parliamentary recess 122w

Gapes, Mr Mike—continued
Racial incitement 389–90

Gardiner, Mr Barry
Debates etc.
Fire services, Greater London (06.11.97) 472–3
Police (14.11.97) 1197–8
Questions
Grant maintained schools, Brent 529w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 1164

Garnier, Mr Edward
Debates etc.
Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 339–40
Questions
Armed forces medical services 78–9w
Conditional fee agreements, Legal aid 574–5
Hospitals, Private finance initiative 103
Parliamentary constituencies, Wales 237w

Gas safety
Prosecutions 559w

Gates, Bill
261w

General Certificate of Secondary Education
New towns 523–6w

General practitioners
see also GP fundholders

General practitioners
Wales 518w

Genetic engineering
Research 664w

Genetically modified organisms
Maize 152w, 281w, 554w
Potatoes 330w
Seeds 71w

George, Mr Andrew
Questions
Community hospitals, Expenditure 599w
Fishing quotas 383
Health services, Rural areas 601–2w
Hospital beds 596w

Gerrard, Mr Neil
Questions
Defence Codification Agency 319w
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment 319w

Ghana
Foreign policy 170w
Human rights 170w

Gibb, Mr Nick
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 718, 720, 769, 772, 786–91
Questions
"Financial Statement and Budget Report November 1997" 511w

Gibraltar
EC action 391w
EC law 391w

Gibson, Dr Ian
Debates etc.
Private roads (03.11.97) 89
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 485, 488, 490–1, 509
Questions
Biotechnology, EC action 572w
Council of Ministers 11–4w
Educational assessment 665w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Cash limits 201w

Gibson, Dr Ian—continued
Genetically modified organisms, Potatoes 330w
Higher education, Research finance 31w

Gill, Mr Christopher
Debates etc.
A5 (05.11.97) 280–2, 284
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 714
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 1000
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 39–40
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1066, 1100–2
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 334–40w
Business questions 1044
Cattle 135w
Dental services, Shropshire 536w
Fish conservation 515w
HMS Cavalier 567w
Pigs, Animal feed 38w
Total allowable catches 515–6w

Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 481–2, 492–500, 520, 527, 537–8
Questions
Billing, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 353w
Billing, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 70w
Billing, Dept of Trade and Industry 296w
Billing, Home Office 21w
Billing, Ministry of Defence 114–5w
Billing, Northern Ireland Office 288–9w
Billing, Scottish Office 46w
Billing, Small businesses 41w
Billing, Treasury 98–9w
Brands, Marketing 402w
Business Link 378w
Business Link, Government grants 295–6w
Business Link, Small businesses 296w
EC Social Charter 311–2
Facsimile transmission 45w
Home Office exports initiative 460–1w
Small businesses, Government grants 298–9w
Small businesses, Ministerial responsibility 41–2w
Trade fairs, Defence equipment 692w

Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Questions
Dept for Education and Employment, Cash limits 228–30w

Gingerbread
New deal for lone parents 376w

Glasgow
Health education 153w

Gloucestershire
Accident and emergency departments 660w

Godman, Dr Norman A
Questions
Appropriate adults, Scotland 95–6
Residential care, Scotland 156w

Godsiff, Mr Roger
Questions
Football 405w

Goggins, Mr Paul
Questions
Export Forum Working Group 127–8w
Immigration Service (Airports), Finance 371w

Goggins, Mr Paul—continued
Immigration Service (Airports), Manpower 370–1w

Gold and foreign exchange reserves
Official publications 566w

Golding, Mrs Llin
Questions
Sports sponsorship, Tobacco advertising 353–4w

Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Questions
Somalia, Overseas aid 894

Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 484, 491, 494, 497–8, 503–4, 524–9

Gorrie, Mr Donald
Questions
Local government finance, Scotland 100–1
Student Awards Agency for Scotland 397–8w
Tuition fees 665w
Tuition fees, EC countries 398w
Tuition fees, Scotland 683w

Government assistance to industry
Aircraft engines 626–7w
Rolls Royce 626–7w

Government buildings
1–2w
Ministry of Defence 582w
Reading 2w

Government Communications Headquarters
390w
Northern Ireland 265w
Recruitment 265w

Government contracts
Dept of Social Security 248–9w
Scottish Office 302–3w

Government departments
Cash limits 621w
Contracts for services 94–5w
Millennium compliance 96w, 468–9w, 627w
Press releases 659w
Tax avoidance 354–5w
VAT 354w

Government grants to local authorities
58–60w, 279–80w
Ethnic minorities 644w
Local government reform 72–3w
Personal social services 679–80w
Political refugees 75–6w

Government information services
Northern Ireland 360–1w
Treasury 354w

Government offices for the regions
Accountability 112

Government Property Lawyers
683–4w

Government securities
221–3w

GP fundholders
181w, 535w
Cornwall 600w
Devon 600w
Private health services 542w

Graduates
556w

Grammar schools
445w

Grant maintained schools
34w, 448w
Brent 529w
School admission 667w

Grantham Hospital
692–3

Gray, Mr James
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 64
Questions
"Excellence in Schools White Paper" 673–4w

Greater London
Council housing 145–6w
Cycleways 60–1w
Fire services (06.11.97) 467–80
Hospitals (14.11.97) 1208–16
NHS administration 694–5
Police (14.11.97) 1137–58
Road traffic 151w

Greater London Authority
Referendums 375w

Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R and Money res* (10.11.97) 586–676

Greater Manchester Police
Taylor, Kevin 24w

Green pound
362–3w
Wales 306w

Greenbelt
54w
Hertfordshire 309–10
Housing construction 483–4w

Greenhouse effect
53–4w, 65–6w, 604–6w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 677–8w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 552–3w
Dept of Trade and Industry 571w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 637w
Home Office 647–8w
Scottish Office 656w
Sea level 168–9w
Welsh Office 685w

Greenway, Mr John
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 43–8, 54, 65–9
Police (14.11.97) 1179, 1196, 1198–202
Questions
Crown Prosecution Service 394
Hill livestock allowances 330w
Legal aid 427w
Meat Hygiene Service 380

Grieve, Mr Dominic
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 32, 42–3, 64–5, 69–70
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 420, 423–7, 431, 433–4, 449–50, 453–4
Questions
Racial incitement 390

Griffiths, Jane
Questions
Ethiopia, Overseas aid 93w
Government buildings, Reading 2w
Kenya, Human rights 168w
Prescription charges 349w
Prison visitors, Public appointments 23w

Griffiths, Jane—continued
Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals NHS Trust 691–2
Young people, Industrial health and safety 217–8w

Griffiths, Mr Nigel, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Trade and Industry
Questions
Air fares, Pricing 241–2w
Animal experiments, Informative labelling 629w
Banks, Nazi victims 402w
Brands, Marketing 402w
Bus services, Regulatory systems 294–5w
CABnet 2000 401–2w
Competition Bill (HL) 1997/98 469–72w
Copywatch 244w
Levitt, Roger, Extradition 403w
Mergers, Members' interests 295w
Monopolies and Mergers Commission, Newsagents 243w
Office of Fair Trading, Office equipment 243w
Pricing, Consumer protection 243w
Trading standards, Children 298w
Wood, Production 243w

Griffiths, Mr Win, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Welsh Office
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 266–70
Questions
Agri-environment action plan, Wales 235w
Beaches, Wales 393w
Beef, Wales 303–4
Beta-interferon, Expenditure 128w
Capital receipts initiative, Wales 303
Dentists, Wales 129w
Developing countries trade, Welsh Office 573–4w
Doctors' list of patients, Wales 50w
EC Agriculture Council 235w
General practitioners, Wales 518w
Green pound, Wales 306w
Greenhouse effect, Welsh Office 685w
Gwent levels, Nature reserves 517w
Health authorities, Contracts 393w
Health authorities, Debts 684–6w
Hill livestock allowances, Wales 306w
Hospital waiting lists, Wales 236w
Hospitals, Fire regulations 685w
Housing construction, Wales 303
Local government expenditure, Wales 305
Merthyr Cynon Valley health unit 236w
NHS finance, Wales 518w
NHS trusts, Wales 305–6
Social services, Inter agency cooperation 519w

Grocott, Mr Bruce
Questions
Tourist industry, Minimum wage 561–2
World War I, Anniversaries 13

Group 4 Securitas
Prison staff 647w
Prisons 692w

Guided weapons
83w

Gulf States
Navy 113w

Gulf War
Iraq–Kuwait conflict

Gulf War syndrome
15
Medical research 14

Gummer, Rt Hon John
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 925–6
Rural areas (04.11.97) 182, 189, 203–6, 211–2

Gunnell, Mr John
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1116–9
Questions
Dept of Health, Cash limits 218–9w
Hospital waiting lists 697–8
Magistrates' courts, Morley 572
National Lottery 404w
Palestinians, Overseas aid 897
Schools 313
Taxation, Quarrying 260w

Guyana
Forest protection 4–5w

Gwent levels
Nature reserves 517w

Gwent Tertiary College
304–5

Gypsies
Eastern Europe 27–8w

Hackney Education Authority
Inspections 529–30w

Hague, Rt Hon William,
Questions
EC Social Charter 306–8
Tobacco advertising 900–1

Hain, Mr Peter, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Welsh Office
Questions
Arms exports, Wales 619w
Arms trade, USA 620w
Cost per student, Wales 238w
Cycling, Wales 620w
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 517–8w
Defence industries, Wales 619–20w
Education, Wales 298–9
Educational finance, Wales 128w
Foreign investment in UK, North Wales 129–30w
Foreign investment in UK, Wales 237w
Gwent Tertiary College 304–5
Higher education, Wales 304, 518–9w
Ministers' domestic visits, Wales 236w
National Assembly of Wales, Education 299
National Assembly of Wales, Public transport 49–50w
Pre-school education, Wales 236w
Public transport, Wales 305–6w
River Dee, Bridges 48w
Road construction, Wales 236w
Road finance, Wales 519w
Rural transport, Wales 48–9w
School population, Wales 517w
Taxation, Welsh Office 240w
Telecommunications technology, Wales 517w
Tuition fees, Wales 235w, 685–6w
Welsh Development Agency, Arms exports 237–8w
Welsh Office, Arms exports 518w
Windfall tax, Wales 237w

Hall, Mr Mike
Debates etc.
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 677
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1124
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1050

Hamilton, Mr Fabian
Questions
EC Fisheries Council 36–7w

Hammond, Mr Philip
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 356–8

Hampshire Constabulary
Public appointments 411–2w

Hancock, Mr Mike
Questions
Building regulations, Access to buildings 477–8w
Cattle, Imports 513–4w
Defence support agencies 311–6w
Employment Service, Contracts for services 160–1w
Export of live animals 399w
Export of live animals, Inspections 340–1w
Export of live animals, Sheep 135w
Hampshire Constabulary, Public appointments 411–2w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict, Armed forces civilians 82w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict, War pensions 301–2w
Livestock, EC external trade 340w
Navy, Laundries 82w
Peace keeping operations 82w
Police Act 1997 211w
Royal Fleet Auxiliary, Foreigners 82w

Handguns
Compensation 117–8w, 418w

Handicapped
Crime victims 181–2w
Income support 531–3w
Sports 566
Welfare to work 452–3w

Handicapped children
Health education 680w

Hanson, Mr David
Questions
Capital receipts initiative, Wales 303
National Assembly of Wales, Referendums 235w
Radioactive waste disposal, Sea pollution 386
Stabilisation Force in Bosnia 81w

Harassment
Mentally ill 434–5w

Hard core unemployed
1028

Harman, Rt Hon Harriet, Secretary of State for Social Security
Questions
Child Support Agency, Annual reports 299–300w
Reardon, Steve, Information officers 453–4w
Sheltered housing, Finance 246w, 456–8w

Harrier aircraft
Air accidents 318w

Harris, Dr Evan
Questions
Blood donors 542w
Blood transfusion services, Hospitals 348w
National Blood Authority 542w
National Blood Authority, Redundancy pay 432w
National Blood Transfusion Service 78w, 542w
National Blood Transfusion Service, Performance standards 705–6

Harvey, Mr Nick
Questions
GP fundholders, Devon 600w
Hospital discharges 602w
NHS trusts, Finance 598–9w
Regional government 607w

Haselhurst, Sir Alan, Chairman of Ways and Means
Debates etc.
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 442

Hatfield Moor
Sites of special scientific interest 58w

Haughey, Charles
393–4w

Hawk aircraft
Indonesia 112w, 401w

Hawkins, Mr Nick
Debates etc.
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 415–7, 426, 428, 430, 440, 448–9
Questions
Ministerial policy advisors 615–7w
Public opinion 385–6w

Hayes, Mr John
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 771
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 680, 682
Private roads (03.11.97) 94

Hazardous wastes
Refuse disposal 31w

Headteachers
Vacancies 700–1w

Healey, Mr John
Questions
EC Energy Council 299w
Museums and galleries, Minimum wage 562–3

Health action zones
482w

Health authorities
Contracts 350w, 393w, 653w
Debts 185w, 684–6w
Finance 534w, 598–9w
Public appointments 349–50w
Scotland 653w
Wales 393w

Health education
Glasgow 153w
Handicapped children 680w
Scotland 157w

Health hazards
Formaldehyde 142–4w
Wood 142–5w

Health insurance
Tax allowances 185w

Health of the Nation
699–700

Health service staff
703
Crimes of violence 702–3
Industrial health and safety 538–9w

Health services
Cystic fibrosis 661w
Finance 534w
Kidney patients 660w
National Lottery 404w
Political refugees 435w
Rural areas 601–2w
Scotland 653–4w

***Health services**—continued*
Scottish Parliament 702
Weather 187w, 432–3w

Heart diseases
Air pollution 348w

Heath, Mr David
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 971–5
Housing construction (12.11.97) 865–6
Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill (HL), 2R (06.11.97) 461–3, 466
Questions
Crown Prosecution Service 392–3
Employment opportunities, Rural transport 1024
UN Special Commission on Iraq 579

Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David,
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 796–801
Questions
Contingency reserve 224w
Drinking and driving, EC action 269w
Economic and monetary union, Publicity 221w
Euro, Costs 512w
European Movement, UK contributions 14w
NHS finance 620w
Public expenditure 224w, 386w
Public expenditure, Supply estimates 224w
Public footpaths 279w
Tax harmonisation, EC countries 258w

Heating
Elderly 595w

Hedges and ditches
149–50w

Helicopters
Armed forces 582w

***Henderson, Mr Doug**, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office*
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 998–1003
Questions
ACP countries, Bananas 199–200w, 388w
Amsterdam Summit, UK delegations 561w
Belarus, Foreign policy 199w
Commonwealth, Bananas 388–9w
Council of Ministers 11–4w, 560–1w
Council of Ministers, Codes of practice 561w
Council of Ministers, EC Social Charter 172w
Czech Republic, Human rights 201w
EC common foreign and security policy, Voting methods 172–3w
EC countries, Police 391w
EC countries, Visas 392w
EC Foreign Affairs Council 561–3w
EC presidency 389w
European Commission 392w
European Communities 392w
European Court of Justice 171w, 390w
European Court of Justice, Jurisdiction 171w
European Court of Justice, Public appointments 501w
European Court of Justice, Treaty of Amsterdam 500–1w
European Movement, UK contributions 14w, 175w

***Henderson, Mr Doug**—continued*
European Parliament, Treaty of Amsterdam 172w
France, Foreign policy 175–6w
Gibraltar, EC action 391w
Gibraltar, EC law 391w
Kazakhstan, Human rights 10–1w
Refugees 391w
Spain, Bulls 175w
Treaty of Amsterdam 200w, 264w, 500w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Common fisheries policy 173w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Equal pay 172w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Labour and employment 172–3w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Treaty on European Union 200w
Treaty of Rome 168w

Hercules aircraft
Defence procurement 256w

Hertfordshire
Greenbelt 309–10
School admission 1029

Higher civil servants
Lord Chancellor's Dept (06.11.97) 407–54

Higher education
225w, 1019–22
Belfast 1020–1
Research finance 31w
Scotland 154w
Wales 304, 518–9w
Warrington 225w

Higher education administration
Cambridge University 447–8w
Oxford University 447–8w

Higher education admission
225–6w, 444w, 666w

Highway code
608w

Hill, Mr Keith
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 623, 659, 662
Police (14.11.97) 1139

Hill farming
384–5

Hill livestock allowances
233w, 330w, 515w
Wales 306w

Hinchliffe, Mr David
Questions
NHS, Pay 696
NHS trusts, Pay 434w

Historic buildings
VAT 258w

HM Chief Inspector of Schools
see Office for Standards in Education

HM Fire Service Inspectorate
282w

HM Prison Service
see Prison Service

HMS Cavalier
567w

HMS Tiger
582w

Hoaxes and false alarms
Burglar alarms 461w

Hodge, Ms Margaret
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 591, 596, 611, 618

***Hodge, Ms Margaret**—continued*
Police (14.11.97) 1142, 1153
Student grants (04.11.97) 122, 138–9, 148–50
Questions
Higher education 1021–2

Hoey, Miss Kate
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 58–9
Police (14.11.97) 1157–8, 1165–7
Questions
Chinook helicopters, Air accidents 687w
National Lottery, Primary education 2–3w

Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Questions
Grantham Hospital 692

Holiday accommodation
Northern Ireland Tourist Board 583–6w

Home energy efficiency scheme
486–7w

Home Office
Billing 21w
Cash limits 209–10w
Civil servants' visits abroad 643–4w
Greenhouse effect 647–8w
Legislation 211w
Members' constituency work 29w
Members' correspondence 120w
Millennium compliance 120–1w
Ministers' visits abroad 642–4w
Monitor Consultancy 374–5w
Official hospitality 640–1w
Private finance initiative 649–50w
Publicity 641–2w
Tax avoidance 213w
Taxation 213w

Home Office exports initiative
460–1w

Home Robertson, Mr John
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 984
Questions
Accounts Commission for Scotland, East Lothian District Council 575–6w
Capital receipts initiative, Scotland 575w
Economic and monetary union, Scotland 99
Post offices, Electricity meters 573w

Homelessness
547–9w
Northern Ireland 694w
Voting rights (12.11.97) 908–9

***Hoon, Mr Geoffrey**, Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Dept*
Debates etc.
Legal aid scheme (05.11.97) 291–6
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 687–90
Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 337–9, 342
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 407–10, 413–4, 431–6, 441–3, 445, 449–52, 454
Questions
Access to Neighbouring Land Act 1992, Northern Ireland 98w
Advance directives 267w
Alternative dispute resolution 205–6w
Civil proceedings 49–50w
Civil proceedings, Insurance 50–1w
Conditional fee agreements, Legal aid 52w, 427w, 429w, 573–5

Hoon, Mr Geoffrey—continued
Court of Appeal (Civil Division) Review 266–7w
Court rules and procedures, Young people 546w
Criminal injuries compensation 428w
Developing countries trade, Lord Chancellor's Dept 638–9w
EC law, Publicity 207w
Immigration appeals 425w, 573
Immigration applications, Judicial review 572–3
Judiciary, Secret societies 425w
Judiciary, Training 638w
Law reform 51–2w, 207w
Leasehold land, Sports facilities 678w
Legal advice and assistance 426w
Legal aid 425–7w, 574
Legal aid, Insurance companies 573
Legal Aid Board, Fees and charges 426–7w
Legislation, Lord Chancellor's Dept 428w
Lord Chancellor's Dept, Buildings 576
Lord Chancellor's Dept, Electronic mail 679w
Lord Chancellor's Dept, Ministerial policy advisors 52w
Magistrates courts 428–9w
Magistrates' courts, Closures 575–6
Magistrates' courts, Morley 572
Magistrates' courts, Stow-on-the-Wold 575
Magistrates' courts, Tavistock 428w
Magistrates' courts, West Yorkshire 207w
Members' correspondence, Lord Chancellor's Dept 98w
Ministers' visits abroad, Lord Chancellor's Dept 474w
Protection from Harassment Act 1997 97–8w
Public records 474–5w
Solicitors, Complaints 52w
Statute law, Law reform 427–8w
Treaty of Amsterdam 678w
Trials 267w
Witnesses 678w

Hope, Mr Phil
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 404–5
Questions
Home Office, Cash limits 209–10w

Horam, Mr John
Questions
Fire services 375w

Horses
Export of live animals 399w

Hospital admissions
Accident and emergency departments 180w
Crawley Hospital 902
Weather 539–42w

Hospital beds
596w
Community hospitals 600w

Hospital discharges
538w, 602w

Hospital doctors
Performance appraisal 536w

Hospital patients
180–1w

Hospital waiting lists
187w, 348w, 537w, 697–8
South West region 596–7w
Wales 236w

Hospitals
Blood transfusion services 348w

Hospitals—continued
Fire regulations 685w
Greater London (14.11.97) 1208–16
Montserrat 499w
Paint 350–1w
Private finance initiative 103, 346w, 431–2w, 543–4w
Scotland 103

Hotels
568w
Fire prevention 23w
Security vetting 374w
Television licences 468w

House of Commons
Postal services 400w

House of Commons catering
Beef 217w

House of Commons Chamber
122w

House of Commons committees
Human rights 400w

House of Commons debates
109–10

House of Commons Members' Fund
(10.11.97) 677–83, (13.11.97) 1060

House of Commons Modernisation Select Committee
see Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee

House of Commons procedure
(13.11.97) 1061–129

House of Commons select committees
National Audit Office 5–6w

House of Commons staff
109

House of Commons standing orders
Private bills (13.11.97) 1017–8

House of Commons times of sittings
111

House of Commons Works of Art Advisory Committee
122–3w

House renovation grants
Northern Ireland Housing Executive 176–7w

Households
507w
Population projection 56w, 63w, 607w

Housing
British Coal Corporation 124w
London boroughs 65w
Research 268w
Royal Ulster Constabulary 289w
Town and country planning 68w

Housing Act 1985
Questions
547–9w

Housing Act 1996
Questions
547–9w

Housing associations
Housing cooperatives 485w

Housing benefits
Interest payments 300w

Housing construction
(12.11.97) 846–70
Essex 554w, 697–8w
Greenbelt 483–4w
Land pollution 609w
Montserrat 499w, 890–1

Housing construction—continued
Wales 303

Housing cooperatives
Housing associations 485w

Housing Corporation
Directors 484w

Housing finance
Scotland 104–5

Housing stock
East Lancashire 695–6w

Howard, John
262w

Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 910, 919–28, 930
Questions
Council of Ministers, EC Social Charter 172w
EC common foreign and security policy, Voting methods 172–3w
European Court of Justice 171w
European Court of Justice, Jurisdiction 171w
European Parliament, Treaty of Amsterdam 172w
Seals 260–1w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Common fisheries policy 173w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 578, 1159–60

***Howarth, Mr Alan**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education and Employment*
Questions
Charitable collections 557w
Child care 529w
Employment Service, Contracts for services 160–1w
Employment zones 308w
Foreign workers, EC countries 309w
Jobseeker's allowance 226–7w
New deal for young unemployed, Wales 1027–8
Voluntary work 1019
Welfare to work, West Midlands 527w

***Howarth, Mr George**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Home Office*
Debates etc.
Fire services, Greater London (06.11.97) 474–80
Questions
Animal experiments 282–6w, 374w
Animal experiments, Cosmetics 121w
Animal experiments, Defence research 284w, 689–90w
Animal experiments, Research finance 284w
Animal experiments, Training 284–5w
Computer privacy 461w
Emergency planning, Telephone systems 648w, 650–1w
European Parliament elections 412–3w
Fire prevention, Hotels 23w
Fire services 375w
Gaming Act 1968 461w
Gaming Board for Great Britain, Public appointments 25w
Gaming clubs, Advertising controls 459–60w
Gaming clubs, Licensing 460w
Gaming clubs, Trade unions 460w
Greater London Authority, Referendums 375w
Huntingdon Life Sciences, Animal experiments 647w

Howarth, Mr George—*continued*
Lotteries, Computer applications 639–40w
Monuments, Armed conflict 30–1w
Polling stations, Access to buildings 647w
Polling stations, Schools 375w
Solvent abuse, Butane gas 119w
Solvent abuse, Retail trade 25w
Summertime 23–4w
Summertime, Crime prevention 119w

Howarth, Mr Gerald
Debates etc.
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1056–60
Questions
Arms exports, Export licensing 629–30w
Iraq, Mass media 582
Lord Chancellor's Dept, Buildings 576
Reading Borough Council, Members' correspondence 386w
Scottish Parliament, EC law 157w

Howells, Dr Kim, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education and Employment
Debates etc.
Education (Student Loans) Bill, Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 76
Questions
Access funds, Part-time education 307w, 522–3w
Adult education 1031–2
Civil servants' visits abroad, Dept for Education and Employment 530w
Cost per student 33w
Degrees 1035–6
Dept for Education and Employment, Cash limits 228–30w
Discretionary student grants 310w, 443w, 1034
Drama education, Student grants 672w
Educational finance 1023–4
General Certificate of Secondary Education, New towns 523–6w
Graduates 556w
Higher education 225w
Higher education, Research finance 31w
Higher education, Warrington 225w
Higher education admission 225–6w, 444w
Legislation, Dept for Education and Employment 442–3w
Mature students 447w
Medical students, Educational qualifications 159–60w
Members' correspondence, Dept for Education and Employment 164w
Millennium compliance, Dept for Education and Employment 163–4w
Modern apprenticeships 528w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept for Education and Employment 446–7w
National grid for learning 668w
Official hospitality, Dept for Education and Employment 530w
Overseas students, Student numbers 310w, 444–5w
Oxford University, Higher education administration 447–8w
Oxford University, Private education 448w
Oxford University, University finance 448w
Oxford University, Wealth 448w
Publicity, Dept for Education and Employment 530–1w
Staff-student ratios 447w
Student grants 1023
Student grants, Costs 310w, 445w
Student loans 307w, 443w
Student loans, Non-payment 310w
Student loans, Part-time education 307w
Student numbers 310w, 666w, 1023

Howells, Dr Kim—*continued*
Tax avoidance, Dept for Education and Employment 227w
Taxation, Dept for Education and Employment 227–8w
Training and enterprise councils, Fraud 1022–3
Training and enterprise councils, Per capita costs 525–6w
Training and enterprise councils, Staffordshire 522w
Tuition fees 665w, 1028–9
Tuition fees, Part-time education 308–9w, 556w
Tuition fees, Scotland 228w, 1028
University finance 669w, 1033–4
Vocational education, Further education colleges 309w
Vocational guidance, Wolverhampton 528–9w

Hoyle, Mr Lindsay
Questions
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency 611–2w
Armed forces storage depots 611w
European fighter aircraft 78w
Highway code 608w
Kidney patients, Health services 660w
Prison employment 688–9w
Train operating units, Performance standards 367–8w

Hughes, Ms Beverley
Questions
Business questions 1046
Educational finance 1023–4
Lotteries, Computer applications 639–40w
National literacy strategy 667w
Prison Service, Annual reports 639w

Hughes, Mr Simon
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 24
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 586–9, 610–7, 632
Police (14.11.97) 1145
Student grants (04.11.97) 121
Questions
Accident and emergency departments, Hospital admissions 180w
Christianity, Millennium 17–8
Church Commissioners, Investment 9w
Government offices for the regions, Accountability 112
Health authorities, Debts 185w, 684–6w
Hospital patients 180–1w
House of Commons Chamber 122w
Millennium Exhibition, Water transport 571
National Audit Office, Manpower 344w
National Lottery 404–5w
NHS administration, Greater London 694–5
NHS finance 179w
NHS trusts, Debts 158w, 185w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards, Debts 206w
Northern Ireland health and social services trusts, Debts 205–6w
School admission 667w
Scottish health boards, Finance 232w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 1161
Welsh assembly 234w

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority
183w

Human rights
415–6w
Algeria 170–1w
Burma 15w

Human rights—*continued*
Czech Republic 201w
Ghana 170w
House of Commons committees 400w
Kazakhstan 10–1w
Kenya 168w, 176w, 389w
Overseas aid 589w
Slovakia 201w
Uganda 168w

Humble, Mrs Joan
Questions
Employment zones 308w

Hunter, Mr Andrew
Questions
Thailand, Visas 165w

Hunting
Defence land 325–9w, 451w

Huntingdon Life Sciences
Animal experiments 647w

Hurst, Mr Alan
Debates etc.
A12, Road construction (12.11.97) 875–7
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 686–7
Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 340–1
Questions
Ordnance Survey, Cash limits 195w
Private health services, NHS finance 430w
Tourist industry, Welfare to work 567

Hussein, Saddam
578, 1162

Hypothermia
Death rate 220w

Iddon, Dr Brian
Questions
Cannabis, Medical research 659w
National Lottery, Health services 404w

IFOR
see Military implementation force in Bosnia

Illegal immigrants
Deportation 368–9w

Illsley, Mr Eric
Questions
Barnsley Hospital, Private finance initiative 535w
Degrees 1035–6

Immigrant detainees
644–6w
Members' constituency work 24w
Police custody 368w
Political refugees 18–20w

Immigrants' dependants
Deportation 22w
Immigration rules 29w

Immigration
29w
Members' correspondence 200–1w

Immigration and Nationality Division
Immigration applications 371–2w
Manpower 654w

Immigration appeals
425w, 573

Immigration applications
Administrative delays 408–9w, 497w
Fraud 651–2w
Immigration and Nationality Division 371–2w
Judicial review 572–3
Wealth 407–8w

Immigration controls
Eurostar 691–2w
Reviews 21–2w

Immigration officers
East Midlands Airport 371w

Immigration rules
Entry clearances 211–2w
Immigrants' dependants 29w

Immigration Service (Airports)
Finance 371w
Manpower 370–1w

Immunity from prosecution
European Police Office 558w

Imports
Bananas 131–4w
Cattle 513–4w

In vitro fertilisation
379w

Incapacity benefit
455–6w
Medical examinations 531w
Social security appeals 531w

Income support
Handicapped 531–3w
Lone parents 86–7w
Mortgages 188w, 301w, 455w, 634–5w

Income tax
387w, 620–1w
Tax allowances 510w

Incontinence
347w

Independent Advisory Panel Review of Health Care in London
see Review of Health Care in London Independent Advisory Panel

India
Ministers' visits abroad 44–5w
Overseas trade 44w, 401w
UK companies abroad 45w
Westland Helicopters 1w

Indonesia
Forest fires 439w
Hawk aircraft 112w, 401w
Military vehicles 266w
Rain forests 591w

Industrial disputes
France 52–3w, 552w
Mersey Docks and Harbour Company 297–8w

Industrial health and safety
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 280w
Health service staff 538–9w
Young people 217–8w

Industrial relations
Banks 472w

Infectious diseases
Disease control 350–1w

Information officers
Reardon, Steve 453–4w

Information warfare
614w

Informative labelling
Animal experiments 629w

***Ingram, Mr Adam**, Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office*
Questions
Border security in Ireland 289–92w
Civil proceedings, Northern Ireland 695w
Demonstrations, Northern Ireland 693w
Demonstrations, Rostrevor 692w
Detention centres, Northern Ireland 293w

***Ingram, Mr Adam**—continued*
Electricity tariffs, Northern Ireland 394w
Exclusion orders 288w
Haughey, Charles 393–4w
Internal security operations, Northern Ireland 293–4w
Northern Ireland, Detention centres 293–4w
Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Holiday accommodation 583–6w
Police stations, Coleraine 8w
Proscribed organisations, Crimes of violence 204w
Public order offences, Belfast 292w
Royal Ulster Constabulary, Housing 289w
Security, Northern Ireland 292–3w
Supermarkets, Northern Ireland 7w

Inheritance tax
Tax thresholds 623w

Injunctions
Mail on Sunday 215–6w, 418–9w

Inland waterways
Safety measures 138w

Innovation
Small businesses (07.11.97) 481–542

Insecticides
Ivermectin 656w

Inspectorate of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals
see Scientific Procedures Inspectorate

Insurance
Civil proceedings 50–1w

Insurance companies
Legal aid 573

Insurance premium tax
101w

Intelligence services
Complaints 4w
Reviews 566w
Select committees 5w

Intelligence Services Act 1994
Questions
25w

Inter agency cooperation
Social services 519w, 658w, 682–3w

Interception of Communications Act 1985
Questions
26–7w

Interest groups
Prime Minister 675w
Social security 454w

Interest payments
Housing benefits 300w

Interest rates
Monetary Policy Committee 567w

Internal security operations
Northern Ireland 293–4w

International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
see World Bank

International conferences
Canary Wharf 617w
Treasury 104–7w

International Court of Justice
Nuclear weapons 81w, 637w

International Criminal Court
390–1w

Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985
Questions
119w

Investment income
Charities 355w

Iran
Diplomatic relations 14w
Refugees 591w

Iraq
Armed forces deployment 582
Mass media 582
Nuclear weapons 388w
Sanctions 579–81, 583
Standing Order No 24 applications (04.11.97) 113
Turkey 583
UN Security Council 387–8w
USA 578–9

Iraq-Kuwait conflict
Armed forces civilians 82w
War pensions 301–2w

Ireland
Security vetting 374w

Islands
Sea level 168–9w

Israel
Army 165–6w

Ivermectin
Insecticides 656w

Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Debates etc.
Oral question time intervention (06.11.97) 386
Rural areas (04.11.97) 176–86, 188–9, 191
Questions
Beef, Food consumption 516w
Fishing quotas 383–4
Hill livestock allowances 515w
Hospital waiting lists, Wales 236w
National Savings Agency, Blackpool 15–6w
NHS finance, Scotland 156w
Public expenditure, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 514–5w
Sheep premiums 378–9, 514w

***Jackson, Ms Glenda**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions*
Debates etc.
A5 (05.11.97) 282–6
A12, Road construction (12.11.97) 877–80
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 669–72
Poole Harbour bridge (12.11.97) 1012–6
Ports, Dover (11.11.97) 820–4
River Thames, Sea navigation (05.11.97) 275–8
Road safety (05.11.97) 243–8
Roads, East Sussex (04.11.97) 224–8
Traffic lights (12.11.97) 872–4
Questions
A40, Cheltenham 484w
A66, Road works 695w
A449, Road safety 604w
Air accidents 366w
Air safety, Transport of radioactive materials 278w
Birmingham relief road, Compensation 476w
Bridges, Road works 272–3w
Bus services, Privatisation 146w
Car sharing 696w
Channel tunnel, Railway network 477w
Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996, Environment protection 279w
Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996, Government grants 477w
Civil Aviation Authority 63w
Cycleways, Greater London 60–1w

Jackson, Ms Glenda—continued
Cycling 60w, 605w
Diesel fuel, Government assistance 138w
Drinking and driving 485w
Drinking and driving, EC action 269w
Drinking and driving, Road accidents 480w
Driving licences, Elderly 275w
Eurostar, Passengers 477w
Exhaust emissions, EC action 271w
Freight facilities grant 486w
Highway code 608w
Jet skis, Safety measures 138–9w
Kirkby Stephen bypass 475w
London Underground 478–9w
London Underground, Private investment 67w
Lorry drivers, Complaints against police 53w
M11, Road construction 546w
Mixed oxide fuel, Transport of radioactive materials 139–40w
Orange badge scheme 54w, 606w
Pedestrians, Road accidents 606w
Polegate bypass, Compensation 195w
Priority routes, Road accidents 148w
Public transport, Local authorities 269w
Railway freight transport 71w
Railway industry, Government grants 67–8w
Railway industry, Performance standards 269w
Railway safety, Passengers 69w
Railway travel, Mill Hill Broadway 139w
Railway travel, Passengers 438–40w
Railway travel, Safety measures 69–70w
Regional airports 63–4w
Road accidents, Eyesight 366w
Road construction, Private finance initiative 195w
Road construction, Public inquiries 475–6w
Road freight transport, Compensation 52–3w, 552w
Road freight transport, EC countries 53w, 267–8w
Road tolls 366–7w
Road traffic, Greater London 151w
Road transport, Private finance initiative 480w
Road works, Local government expenditure 275–7w
Road works, Public utilities 482w
Rolling stock leasing companies, Finance 71–2w
Salvage, Tugboats 57w
Sea rescue, Solent 281–2w
Traffic noise 366w
Train operating units, Performance standards 139w, 367–8w
Transport infrastructure, Data banks 696w
Transport of radioactive materials 146–7w
Transport policy, Rural areas 277–8w
Trees, Road works 483w
Walking, Children 696–7w
Wyre Piddle bypass, Transport supplementary grants 552w

Jackson, Helen
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1092–4
Oath and affirmation, Points of order (12.11.97) 907
Questions
Beta-interferon, Expenditure 179w
Beta-interferon, Multiple sclerosis 184w
Dry stone walls 270w
Multiple sclerosis, Medical treatments 183w
Paper industry, Waste disposal 147w
Restrictive trade practices 892

Japan
Antarctic Treaty 202w

Jazz
406w

Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Debates etc.
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 685–6
Student grants (04.11.97) 165–6
Questions
Electronic mail, President of the Council 609w
Exchange rate mechanism 223w
Households, Population projection 607w
Housing construction, Essex 554w, 697–8w
Housing construction, Land pollution 609w
Ministers, Electronic mail 441w
North Essex Health Authority 680–1w
Population, Essex 697–9w
Telecommunications technology, Colchester 493w
Telecommunications technology, Planning permission 491–3w
Tuition fees, Wales 685–6w

Jenkins, Mr Brian
Questions
Accountants, Mutual recognition of qualifications 473w
Formaldehyde, Health hazards 142–4w
Hotels 568w
Hotels, Television licences 468w
Incapacity benefit, Medical examinations 531w
Incapacity benefit, Social security appeals 531w
Mature students 447w
Oxford University, Higher education administration 447–8w
Oxford University, Private education 448w
Oxford University, University finance 448w
Oxford University, Wealth 448w
Small businesses 40w
Small businesses, Staffordshire 125w
Small businesses, Tamworth 39–40w
Staff-student ratios 447w
Training and enterprise councils, Staffordshire 522w
University finance 669w
Wood, Health hazards 142–5w
Wood, Production 243w

Jet skis
Safety measures 138–9w

Jobseeker's allowance
226–7w

Johnson, Mr Alan
Questions
Livestock, Animal welfare 332w
New deal for young unemployed 667w
Telecommunications technology, Planning permission 152–3w

Johnson, Miss Melanie
Questions
New deal for young unemployed 1025–6

Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Debates etc.
Roads, East Sussex (04.11.97) 223
Questions
Closed circuit television, Crime prevention 688w

Jones, Mr Barry
Questions
Defence industries, Technology transfer 8
Magistrates' courts, Closures 575

Jones, Mr Barry—continued
National Assembly of Wales 300
New deal for young unemployed, Wales 1027–8
River Dee, Bridges 48w

Jones, Helen M
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 140–1
Questions
Development aid 306
European fighter aircraft 78w
Higher education 225w
Higher education, Warrington 225w
Higher education admission 225–6w
New deal for lone parents 675–6w
Prison medical services 414w, 651w
Prisons, Drug abuse 415w
Student numbers 666w
Territorial Army, Armed forces women 3
Trading standards, Children 298w
Warehouse parties, Public order policing 215w

Jones, Mr Ieuan Wyn
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 257–60
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 964–7
Questions
Beef, Wales 303–4
Common agricultural policy 379

Jones, Ms Jenny
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1113–4
Maiden speech (07.11.97) 512–6
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 512–6
Questions
ADAPT initiative 556w
Cable television, Road works 402–3w
Caribbean, Bananas 93–4w
Housing associations, Housing cooperatives 485w
Housing Corporation, Directors 484w
Judgments 419–23w
NHS trusts, Parking 74w
Prison Service 423–4w
Radio broadcasting licences, West Midlands 404w
Regional development agencies, Voluntary organisations 482w
Road works, Public utilities 482w
Trees, Road works 483w
Vocational guidance, Wolverhampton 528–9w
Welfare to work, West Midlands 527w

Jones, Mr Jon Owen, Lord Commissioner of Her Majestys Treasury
Debates etc.
Correction to division list figures (04.11.97) 115
Questions
Electronic mail, President of the Council 609w

Jones, Dr Lynne
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 121, 133, 136, 156–9
Questions
Arms trade, EC action 169w
Birmingham Health Authority, Private finance initiative 431–2w
Birmingham Prison, Prisoner escapes 640w
European fighter aircraft 111w, 254–5w
European fighter aircraft, Costs 111w
European fighter aircraft, Defence procurement 111w

Jones, Dr Lynne—continued
Hospitals, Private finance initiative 346w, 431w
Livestock, Animal welfare 332w
Treaty of Rome 168w

Jones, Mr Martyn David
Questions
Agri-environment action plan, Wales 235w
Development Assistance Committee, Women 590w
Environmental education 666w
Rural areas 332w

Jones, Mr Nigel
Questions
A40, Cheltenham 484w
Accident and emergency departments, Gloucestershire 660w
Government Communications Headquarters 390w
Sports sponsorship, Tobacco advertising 467–8w
Unidentified flying objects, Defence research 450w

Jowell, Ms Tessa, Minister for Public Health, Dept of Health
Questions
Arachnoiditis 433w, 596w
Cannabis, Drug abuse 74w
Creutzfeldt-Jakob dementia 346w
Cystic fibrosis, Health services 661w
Dept of Health, Press releases 659w
Drug industry 217w
Environmental health 536w, 700–1
Fluoridation 379w
Genetic engineering, Research 664w
Health of the Nation 699–700
Heart diseases, Air pollution 348w
Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority 183w
In vitro fertilisation 379w
Legislation, Dept of Health 345w
Malaria, Drugs 663w
Members' correspondence, Dept of Health 186w
Meningitis, Southampton 659–60w
Millennium compliance, Dept of Health 185–6w
Ministers' visits abroad, Dept of Health 544w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept of Health 437–8w
Myodil 596w, 658w
NHS, Millennium compliance 77–8w
Paracetamol 657w
Public Health Laboratory Service 179–80w
School meals 381w
Smoking, Young people 698
Smoking related diseases, Costs 537–8w
Surgery 380w
Taxation, Dept of Health 219w
Thalidomide 663–4w
Tobacco advertising 536–7w, 699–701, 703–4
Tobacco advertising, Motor sports 699
Tobacco advertising, Sports sponsorship 699
Tobacco advertising, Young people 704
Transplant surgery, Research 351–2w

Judgments
419–23w

Judicial review
Immigration applications 572–3

Judiciary
EC countries 391w
Secret societies 425w
Training 638w

Jurisdiction
European Court of Justice 171w

Kazakhstan
Human rights 10–1w

Keeble, Ms Sally
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 153–4

Keen, Mr Alan
Questions
Government departments, Contracts for services 94–5w
Ministry of Defence, Cash limits 252–3w

Keen, Ann
Debates etc.
Police (14.11.97) 1171–2

Keetch, Mr Paul
Questions
Chechnya, Kidnapping 389w
Hard core unemployed 1028

Kelly, Ms Ruth
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 734, 769–72, 798

Kemp, Mr Fraser
Debates etc.
Private roads (03.11.97) 90

Kennedy, Mr Charles
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Inquiries 5w
Common agricultural policy 378
Skye bridge 103–4

Kenya
Armed forces training 494w
Human rights 168w, 176w, 389w

Key, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 833–5, 844
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 999
Rural areas (04.11.97) 183
Questions
Bosnia-Herzegovina, Defence expenditure 5–6

Kidnapping
Chechnya 389w

Kidney, Mr David
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 855–6
Road safety (05.11.97) 229–32, 241–2
Questions
Alternative dispute resolution 205–6w
Burma, Democracy 202w
Car boot sales, Licensing 121w
Children, Advocacy 660–1w
Conditional fee agreements, Legal aid 427w, 573–4
Drinking and driving 485w
Food industry 131w
Overseas aid, Welfare to work 889

Kidney patients
Health services 660w

Kilfoyle, Mr Peter, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Office of Public Service
Questions
Millennium compliance, Cabinet Office 96–7w
Monitor Consultancy, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 463–4w

King, Ms Oona
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 659
Questions
Ethnic minorities, Government grants to local authorities 644w
World War II, Monuments 309

Kingham, Ms Tess
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 853–5

Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Questions
Best value 479–80w
Council housing, Bromsgrove 484–5w
Greenbelt, Housing construction 483–4w

Kirkby Stephen bypass
475w

Kirkwood, Mr Archy
Questions
Clergy, Pensions 10w
Dept of Social Security, Press releases 594w
House of Commons Works of Art Advisory Committee 122–3w
Minister for Women, Press releases 593–4w
New deal for young unemployed, Scotland 98

Know-how Fund
589w
Belarus 589w

Krebs Committee
see Tuberculosis in Cattle and Badgers Review

Kumar, Dr Ashok
Questions
A66, Road works 695w
Low Pay Commission 570w
University finance 1033–4

Labour and employment
Treaty of Amsterdam 172–3w

Labour costs
NHS finance 535w

Labour Party
Finance 902–6

Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Debates etc.
Ports, Dover (11.11.97) 820

Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Questions
Welsh assembly, Costs 235w

Lancaster
E coli 381

Land pollution
Housing construction 609w
Radioactivity 274w

Land use
Planning appeals 550w

Lansley, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 28
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 347, 357
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 643, 646–50
Student grants (04.11.97) 125
Questions
Mergers, Members' interests 295w

Laundries
Navy 82w

Law Officers' Dept
see Attorney General

Law reform
51–2w, 207w
Limited liability 125w
Statute law 427–8w

Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 253–5, 263–4
Questions
Employment opportunities, Wales 297
Private finance initiative 103w
Registry of Friendly Societies, Cash limits 223w
Treasury, Cash limits 223–4w
Treasury, International conferences 104–7w

Laxton, Mr Bob
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1105–8
Questions
Government Property Lawyers 683–4w
Rolls Royce, Government assistance to industry 626–7w

Lead pollution
366w

Leasehold land
Sports facilities 678w

Leasehold Valuation Tribunal
Administrative delays 271–2w

Leeds Prison
Suicide 690w

Legal advice and assistance
426w

Legal aid
425–7w, 574
Conditional fee agreements 52w, 427w, 429w, 573–5
Insurance companies 573

Legal Aid Board
Fees and charges 426–7w

Legal aid scheme
(05.11.97) 287–96

Legislative process
(13.11.97) 1061–129
Finance Bill 1997/98 108
Parliamentary reform 108

Leicestershire
NHS finance 693

Leicestershire Constabulary
369w

Leigh, Mr Edward
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 405
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 914
Questions
Families 506w
Households 507w

Leisure facilities
Town and country planning 481w

Lepper, Mr David
Questions
NHS administration 536w

Leslie, Mr Christopher
Questions
Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority 183w
Royal Opera House 353w

Letwin, Mr Oliver
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 830–2, 836, 840
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 680
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 329
Questions
Simon of Highbury, Lord, Shares 42w

Levitt, Roger
Extradition 403w

Levitt, Mr Tom
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1119–21
Questions
Cuba, Foreign policy 165w
Environmental impact assessment, EC law 555w

Lewes Prison
Prison population 30w

Lewis, Mr Ivan
Questions
Shayler, David, MI5 215–6w
Welfare to work, Ethnic groups 442w

Lewis, Dr Julian
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 839
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 912
Questions
Tobacco advertising 704
Trident, Defence review 4

Lewis, Mr Terry
Questions
Non-departmental public bodies, Accountability 463w

Liddell, Mrs Helen, Economic Secretary to the Treasury
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 800–6
Questions
Banking Ombudsman 679w
Banks, Millennium compliance 101w
Billing, Treasury 98–9w
Central banks 511–2w
Cheques, EC countries 354w
Competition Bill (HL) 1997/98 566w
Currency movements 625–6w
Death rate, Elderly 220–1w
Death rate, Hypothermia 220w
Death rate, Weather 103w, 381–2w, 429–30w
Economic and monetary union 506w
Economic and monetary union, EC budget 99w
Economic and monetary union, Newspaper press 223w
Economic and monetary union, Official publications 626w
Economic and monetary union, Public sector debt 504–5w
Economic and monetary union, Publicity 221w
Euro, Costs 512w
European Commission budget 103w
European currency unit 98w
European currency unit, Design 505w
Exchange rate mechanism 223w
Exchange rates, Sterling 16w
Families 506w
"Financial Statement and Budget Report November 1997" 511w
Gold and foreign exchange reserves, Official publications 566w

Liddell, Mrs Helen—continued
Government securities 221–3w
Households 507w
Legislation, Treasury 355w
Members' correspondence, Treasury 564w
Millennium compliance 386w
Millennium compliance, Treasury 621–2w
Monetary Policy Committee, Interest rates 567w
Monitor Consultancy, Treasury 565–6w
National debt 221w
National Savings Agency, Blackpool 15–6w
Overseas investment 507w
Overseas trade, Currencies 101–2w
Paracetamol, Death 508–9w
Paracetamol, Suicide 508w
Registry of Friendly Societies, Cash limits 223w
Statistics 505w
Treasury, Bank of England 506w
Treasury, Cash limits 223–4w
Treasury, Government information services 354w
UK contributions to EC budget 510–1w
Unemployed, Take-up of employment 624–5w
£2 coins 225w

Lidington, Mr David
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 852

Life imprisonment
415w

Lighting
Pollution control 272w

Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 719–20, 723–34, 750
Questions
Economic and monetary union, Ministerial policy advisors 221–2w
Economic and monetary union, Newspaper press 223w
Exchange rates, Sterling 16w
Government securities 221–3w
Ministerial policy advisors 222w, 225w
National debt 221w
Official secrets, Disclosure of information 260w

Limited liability
Law reform 125w

Lincolnshire
Military exercises 580w

Linton, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Voluntary work (13.11.97) 1130–2, 1134
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 601–3
Questions
Sewage, Floods 550w

Literacy summer schools initiative
665–6w

Livestock
Animal welfare 332w
EC external trade 340w

Livingstone, Mr Ken
Questions
Police equipment, Chemical weapons 316–7w
Vaccination, Defence research 317w

Livsey, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 255–7
Questions
Local government expenditure, Wales 305

Lloyd, Mr Tony, Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Debates etc.
Lockerbie, Bombings (07.11.97) 550–8
Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill (HL), 2R (06.11.97) 455–8, 464–6
Questions
Antarctic, Ozone layer 266w
Antarctic Treaty 202w
Antarctic Treaty, Japan 202w
Arms trade, EC action 169w
Bosnia-Herzegovina, War crimes 390w
British dependent territories 499–500w
British embassies, Telephones 264w
Chechnya, Kidnapping 389w
Commonwealth Centre 564w
Cuba, Foreign policy 165w
Cuba, Revolutions 362w
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Diplomatic relations 167w
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Refugees 167w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Civil service recruitment 498w
Ghana, Human rights 170w
International Court of Justice, Nuclear weapons 637w
International Criminal Court 390–1w
Iraq, Nuclear weapons 388w
Kenya, Human rights 168w, 176w, 389w
Legislation, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 265w
Lockerbie, Bombings 169–70w
Members' correspondence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 171w
Ministers' visits abroad, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 502–4w
Montserrat, Disasters 266w, 498–9w
Montserrat, Hospitals 499w
Montserrat, Housing construction 499w
Montserrat, Refugees 499w
NATO 167–8w
Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe 169w
Tax avoidance, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 636w
Taxation, Treasury 636–7w
UN Committee on Disarmament and International Security, Nuclear weapons 168w
UN Register of Conventional Arms 563w
UN Security Council, Iraq 387–8w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 500w
United Nations, Festivals and special occasions 169w

Llwyd, Mr Elfyn
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 252, 266
Legal aid scheme (05.11.97) 291
Questions
Beaches, Wales 393w
Belarus, Know-how Fund 589w
Conditional fee agreements, Legal aid 429w
Dentists, Wales 129w
Educational finance, Wales 128w
European fighter aircraft 615w
Green pound 362–3w
Green pound, Wales 306w
Hill livestock allowances, Wales 306w
Local government finance, Wales 237w
National Assembly of Wales, Referendums 357–8w

Llwyd, Mr Elfyn—continued
Police, Wales 688w
Prisons, Construction 689w
Public transport, Wales 305–6w
Road finance, Wales 519w
Telecommunications technology, Wales 517w

Local authorities
Public transport 269w

"Local Authority and Emergency Service Information on Nuclear Weapon Contingency Plans"
580–1w

Local authority powers
Advertising controls 479w
Public footpaths 279w

Local education authorities
Revenue support grant 140–1w

Local government audit
15–6

Local government constituencies
Scotland 47–8w

Local Government (Contracts) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
Lords amendts (11.11.97) 810–6

Local government corruption
Scotland 101

Local government expenditure
Road works 275–7w
Wales 305

Local government finance
505–6w
Capital investment 476–7w
Community councils 655w
Education vouchers 147w
Scotland 100–1, 104
Wales 237w

Local Government Finance (Supplementary Credit Approvals) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
Royal Assent (06.11.97) 410

Local government reform
Costs 482w
Government grants to local authorities 72–3w

Local government revenue
278w

Local government services
Per capita costs 68–9w

Local government social services
Scotland 101

Local government staff
Scotland 105

Lock, Mr David
Debates etc.
Legal aid scheme (05.11.97) 290–1
Questions
Tobacco advertising 703–4

Lockerbie
Bombings 3–4w, 46w, 169–70w, 262w, (07.11.97) 543–58

Locomotives
National Railway Museum 610w

London boroughs
Capital receipts initiative 65w
Council tax 546w
Housing 65w

London Underground
478–9w

London Underground—continued
Private investment 67w

Lone parent premium
89w

Lone parents
Family premium 88–9w
Income support 86–7w
Social security claims 676–7w
Social security recipients 88w

Lord Chancellor's Dept
Buildings 576
Developing countries trade 638–9w
Electronic mail 679w
Higher civil servants (06.11.97) 407–54
Legislation 428w
Members' correspondence 98w
Ministerial policy advisors 52w
Ministers' visits abroad 474w

Lorry drivers
Complaints against police 53w

Lotteries
309
Computer applications 639–40w

Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976
Questions
639–40w

Loughton, Mr Tim
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 711, 776, 779–80
Questions
Millennium Exhibition 451w
Viticulture 332w

Love, Mr Andrew
Questions
Restrictive trade practices 593w

Low flying
Military aircraft 79w
Scotland 251w

Low incomes
Credit 588w
NHS charges 218w

Low Pay Commission
570w

Luff, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 680
Questions
A449, Road safety 604w
Accident and emergency departments 660w
Church schools 672w
Drama education, Student grants 672w
English National Opera, Royal Opera House 610w
Tobacco advertising 898–9
Wyre Piddle bypass, Transport supplementary grants 552w

Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
Debates etc.
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 410–5, 424–5, 431, 433–5, 437–8, 441–7, 451–2
Questions
Crown Prosecution Service 392

M11
Road construction 546w

McAllion, Mr John
Questions
Local government finance, Scotland 104
Overseas aid, Human rights 589w
Solvent abuse, Butane gas 119w

McCafferty, Ms Chris
Questions
NHS trusts, Public appointments 534w

McCartney, Mr Ian, Minister of State, Dept of Trade and Industry
Questions
Accountants, Mutual recognition of qualifications 473w
Billing, Dept of Trade and Industry 296w
Copyright, Data banks 571w
Film industry, Manpower 571w
Industrial relations, Banks 472w
Limited liability, Law reform 125w
Low Pay Commission 570w
Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, Industrial disputes 297–8w
Milk Development Council, Taxation 573w
Patents 472–3w
Post offices, Electricity meters 573w
Quadrant Catering 45w
Trade unions, EC countries 311w
United Bank 472w

McCartney, Mr Robert
Questions
Exclusion orders 288w
Haughey, Charles 393–4w
Republic of Ireland, Passports 199w
Social security payments, Northern Ireland 202–4w

McDonagh, Ms Siobhain
Questions
Tourist industry, Welfare to work 107w

McDonnell, Mr John
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 596, 622, 645, 660, 663, 665
Police (14.11.97) 1141, 1155, 1178, 1182–5, 1195, 1200
Questions
Armed forces, Employment discrimination 613w
Arms surplus sales 686–7w
Business questions 1046
European Court of Justice 390w
European Court of Justice, Public appointments 501w
Freemasonry 418w
Judiciary, Training 638w
Kenya, Human rights 389w
Metropolitan Police, Equal Opportunities Unit 461–2w
Planning permission, Racial discrimination 550w, 552w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 1162–3

McGrady, Mr Eddie
Questions
Air safety, Transport of radioactive materials 278w
British Nuclear Fuels, Financial targets 295w
Capitation Formula Review Group, Northern Ireland health and social services boards 693–4w
Demonstrations, Northern Ireland 693w
Dounreay, Radioactive waste disposal 496w
Electricity tariffs, Northern Ireland 394w
Environment protection, Northern Ireland 394w
Greenhouse effect 53–4w
Homelessness, Northern Ireland 694w
Indonesia, Forest fires 439w
Land pollution, Radioactivity 274w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards 694w

McGrady, Mr Eddie—continued
Northern Ireland health and social services trusts 694w
Northern Ireland Housing Executive, House renovation grants 176–7w
Plutonium, Radioactive waste disposal 296–7w
Radiation hazards, Telecommunications technology 7w, 395w
Radioactive waste disposal 55–6w
Sellafield, Radioactive waste disposal 55w
THORP, Nuclear fuel reprocessing 297w
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum 6w
Waste disposal, Sea pollution 198w

MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1075–80, 1083–4
Questions
Civil service pensions 344w
Exhaust emissions, EC action 271w
Traffic noise 366w

McGuire, Mrs Anne
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 987
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 43, 46, 64

McIntosh, Miss Anne
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 213
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Disease control 342w
Civil Aviation Authority 63w
Duty free allowances 260w
Solvent abuse, Retail trade 25w
Taxation, Voting methods 100w
Tuition fees, Scotland 1028

McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Questions
New deal for young unemployed, Scotland 96–7

Mackinlay, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 942–4
House of Commons divisions, Points of order (03.11.97) 75
Oral question time intervention (03.11.97) 6
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 437–8
War Widows and Pensioners (Equal Treatment) Bill, 1R (05.11.97) 334–6
Questions
Access to Parliament, Work experience 123w
Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust, Public appointments 76–7w, 435–6w, 665w
BBC external services 392–3w
European Communities 392w
Levitt, Roger, Extradition 403w
National Assembly of Wales, Referendums 234–5w
NHS trusts, Directors 380–1w
War pensions, Earnings rules 84w
War widows' pensions, Northern Ireland 8w

Maclean, Rt Hon David
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 179
Questions
Kirkby Stephen bypass 475w

Maclean, Rt Hon David—continued
Road construction, Public inquiries 475–6w

McLeish, Mr Henry, Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office
Questions
Devolution, Scotland 154w
Electorate, Scotland 574–5w
Lockerbie, Bombings 46w
Prisons, Private finance initiative 154w
Referendums, Scotland 155w
Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission 153w
Scottish Executive, Council of Ministers 105–6
Scottish Executive, Ministers 106
Scottish Parliament 107–8
Scottish Parliament, EC law 157w
Scottish Parliament, Parliamentary buildings 157–8w

Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
Questions
Handguns, Compensation 118w
Health education, Scotland 157w
National Lottery 568–9

McLoughlin, Mr Patrick
Debates etc.
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 435
Questions
Derbyshire Constabulary, Revenue support grant 210w
Derbyshire County Council, Revenue support grant 197w
Educational finance, Derbyshire 141–2w
School meals 162w
School meals, Derbyshire 161–2w

McNamara, Mr Kevin
Questions
Armed forces, Complaints 320–1w
Armed forces deployment, Northern Ireland 324–5w
Armed forces housing, Northern Ireland 322w
Armed forces strength, Northern Ireland 323–4w
Body searches 287w
Border security in Ireland 289–92w
Category A prisoners 415w
Children, Northern Ireland 358–60w
Detention centres, Northern Ireland 293w
Government Communications Headquarters, Northern Ireland 265w
Internal security operations, Northern Ireland 293–4w
McNamee, Danny 414w
Miscarriages of justice, Counselling 462w
Northern Ireland, Detention centres 293–4w
Party conferences, Security 373–4w
Prisoners on remand, Trials 413w
Psychology, Medical malpractice 352w
Public order offences, Belfast 292w
Royal Irish Regiment 322–4w
Royal Ulster Constabulary, Housing 289w
Security, Northern Ireland 292–3w
Security vetting, Hotels 374w
Surveillance, Northern Ireland 320w

McNamee, Danny
414w

McNulty, Mr Tony
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 616–20, 652
Police (14.11.97) 1142, 1190–4

MacShane, Mr Denis
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 934, 948, 969, 992
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 331–2
Questions
Developing countries trade, Attorney General 684w
Developing countries trade, Dept of Social Security 636w
Developing countries trade, Lord Chancellor's Dept 638–9w
Developing countries trade, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 618w
Developing countries trade, Prime Minister 617w
Developing countries trade, Scottish Office 655w
Developing countries trade, Treasury 625w
Developing countries trade, Welsh Office 573–4w
Monitor Consultancy, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 463–4w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 466w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept for Education and Employment 446–7w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept of Health 437–8w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept of Social Security 377w
Monitor Consultancy, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 367w
Monitor Consultancy, Home Office 374–5w
Monitor Consultancy, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 363w
Monitor Consultancy, Northern Ireland Office 396w
Monitor Consultancy, Prime Minister 617w
Monitor Consultancy, Scottish Office 654–5w
Monitor Consultancy, Treasury 565–6w
Monitor Consultancy, Welsh Office 358w

Mactaggart, Fiona
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 48
Questions
Prisoners' transfers, Republic of Ireland 26w
Tobacco advertising, Young people 704

McWalter, Mr Tony
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 864

Madel, Sir David
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 328

Magistrates' courts
428–9w
Closures 575–6
Essex (10.11.97) 684–90
Morley 572
Stow-on-the-Wold 575
Tavistock 428w
West Yorkshire 207w

Magistrates' Courts (Procedure) Bill (HL) 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R (05.11.97) 337–42

Mahon, Mrs Alice
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 25

Mahon, Mrs Alice—continued
Questions
Defence industries, Diversification 79w

Maiden speeches
Jones, Jenny (07.11.97) 512–6
Marsden, Gordon (04.11.97) 143–5

Maidenhead
Town and country planning (12.11.97) 881–8

Mail on Sunday
Injunctions 215–6w, 418–9w

Maintenance
Children 189w

Maize
Genetically modified organisms 152w, 281w, 554w

Malaria
Drugs 663w

Malins, Mr Humfrey
Debates etc.
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 418–21, 429–30, 432, 441
Questions
Deportation, Elderly 22–3w
Immigrant detainees 644–6w
Immigration applications, Judicial review 572–3

Mallaber, Judy
Debates etc.
Private roads (03.11.97) 87–9

Mallon, Mr Seamus
Questions
Northern Ireland health and social services boards, Directors 588w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards, Public appointments 586–8w
Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Holiday accommodation 583–6w
Southern Health and Social Services Board, Public appointments 586w

Managers
NHS 543w

Manchester
Commonwealth games 312

Mandela, Nelson
(07.11.97) 543–58

Mandelson, Mr Peter, Minister Without Portfolio
Questions
Central government, Mass media 452w
Millennium Exhibition 344–5w, 451w, 573w
Millennium Exhibition, Construction 451w
Millennium Exhibition, Consultants 609–10w
Millennium Exhibition, Contracts 451w, 534w
Millennium Exhibition, Disclosure of information 533w
Millennium Exhibition, Police 610w
Millennium Exhibition, Pricing 344w
Millennium Exhibition, Tourists 571–2
Millennium Exhibition, Transport infrastructure 570
Millennium Exhibition, Water transport 570–1
Ministerial duties 452w
Ministers, Travelling expenses 452w
New Millennium Experience 533w, 573w

Maples, Mr John
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 21–3

Maples, Mr John—continued
Questions
Tobacco advertising 700
Tobacco advertising, Sports sponsorship 699

Marek, Dr John
Questions
Gibraltar, EC action 391w
Gibraltar, EC law 391w

Marginal tax rates
564–5w

Marine animals
Nature reserves 278–9w

Marines
81w

Marketing
Brands 402w

Married people
Taxation 565w

Marsden, Mr Gordon
Debates etc.
Maiden speech (04.11.97) 143–5
Student grants (04.11.97) 143–5
Questions
Access funds, Part-time education 307w, 522–3w
Student loans 307w
Tuition fees, Part-time education 308–9w, 556w

Marshall, Mr David
Questions
Health education, Glasgow 153w

Marshall, Mr Jim
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 398
Questions
NHS finance, Leicestershire 693
Student numbers 1021

Marshall-Andrews, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 40–2, 47
Questions
Millennium Exhibition, Contracts 534w
Millennium Exhibition, Disclosure of information 533w
New Millennium Experience 533w, 573w

Martlew, Mr Eric
Questions
Business questions 1042
Developing countries, Debts written off 588w

Mass media
Central government 452w
Iraq 582

Mature students
447w

Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Questions
British Academy of Sport 564–5
Millennium Exhibition, Tourists 571–2
Museums and galleries, Minimum wage 563

Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
Debates etc.
Police (14.11.97) 1138, 1148–57, 1165, 1206

May, Mrs Theresa
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 501, 511

May, Mrs Theresa*—*continued
Student grants (04.11.97) 154–6
Town and country planning, Maidenhead (12.11.97) 881–3
Questions
Public expenditure, Scotland 155w
Tuition fees, Scotland 1020

Meacher, Rt Hon Michael, Minister for the Environment, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Questions
Air pollution control 494w

Means tested benefits
Pensioners 249–50w

Meat
388–9

Meat Hygiene Service
379–80

Medical equipment
Diabetes 187w
Millennium compliance 77–8w

Medical examinations
Incapacity benefit 531w

Medical malpractice
Psychology 352w

Medical research
Cannabis 659w
Chronic fatigue syndrome 182–3w
Gulf War syndrome 14

Medical students
Educational qualifications 159–60w

Medical treatments
Children 680w
Multiple sclerosis 183w

Members' constituency work
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 171w
Home Office 29w
Immigrant detainees 24w

Members' correspondence
14–5w, 362w, 374w, 646w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 108w
Dept for Education and Employment 164w
Dept of Health 186w
Dept of Social Security 248w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 151–2w
Dept of Trade and Industry 401w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 171w
Home Office 120w
Immigration 200–1w
Lord Chancellor's Dept 98w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit 11w, 166w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 137w
Ministry of Defence 113w
Northern Ireland Office 289w
Reading Borough Council 386w
Treasury 564w

Members' facilities
Smoking 124w

Members' interests
Mergers 295w

Members' oath and affirmation
Alexander, Douglas (12.11.97) 907

Members' staff
123w

Meningitis
Southampton 659–60w

Mentally disadvantaged
New deal for young unemployed 97

Mentally disturbed offenders
Prisoners on remand 654w

Mentally handicapped
Crime victims 287w

Mentally ill
Harassment 434–5w

Merchant ships
Ship chartering 577–9w

Mercury
Air pollution 606–7w

Mergers
Members' interests 295w
NHS trusts 537w

Merron, Ms Gillian
Questions
Eastern Arts Board 405w
Literacy summer schools initiative 665–6w

Mersey Docks and Harbour Company
Industrial disputes 297–8w

Merthyr Cynon Valley health unit
236w

Methane
Tipping of waste 487w

Metropolitan Police
Chemical weapons 412w
Equal Opportunities Unit 461–2w

MFV Sapphire
Scotland 99–100

MI5
Shayler, David 24w, 215–6w
Surveillance 119w

Michael, Mr Alun, Minister of State, Home Office
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 30–4, 43, 48–50, 54–7, 59–60, 63, 69–71
Police (14.11.97) 1152–3, 1169–70, 1181–2, 1203–7
Questions
Aitken, Jonathan 211w, 557–8w
Burglar alarms, Hoaxes and false alarms 461w
Charitable collections 558–9w
Closed circuit television, Crime prevention 688w
Companies, Voluntary work 682w
Convention Relating to Extradition Between Member States of the EU, Parliamentary scrutiny of EC law 648–9w
Crime victims, Mentally handicapped 287w
Criminal injuries compensation scheme 690w
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 370w
Deportation, Illegal immigrants 368–9w
Derbyshire Constabulary, Revenue support grant 210w
Domestic gas appliances, Death 559w
European Police Office, EC law 691w
European Police Office, Immunity from prosecution 558w
Evidence, Closed circuit television 407w
Evidence, Disclosure of information 374w
Firearms 24w
Freemasonry 418w
Hampshire Constabulary, Public appointments 411–2w
Handguns, Compensation 117–8w, 418w
Home Office exports initiative 460–1w
Leicestershire Constabulary 369w
Metropolitan Police, Chemical weapons 412w

Michael, Mr Alun*—*continued
Metropolitan Police, Equal Opportunities Unit 461–2w
Parenting orders 643–4w
Party conferences, Security 373w
Perjury 559w
Police, Manpower 211w, 462–4w
Police, North Wales 21w
Police, Performance standards 559–60w
Police, Wales 688w
Police Act 1997 211w
Police custody, Death 412w
Police discipline 372–3w
Remand in custody 116–7w
Sey, Ibrahima 459w
Surveillance, Codes of practice 282w
Taylor, Kevin, Greater Manchester Police 24w
Warehouse parties, Public order policing 215w
West Mercia Constabulary, Chemical weapons 412w
Young offenders, Remand in custody 213–5w

Michie, Mrs Ray
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 198
Questions
Association of Scottish Community Councils 655w
Caledonian MacBrayne 156w
NHS administration, Scotland 107

Middle East
Peace negotiations 498w

Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit
Administrative delays 11w, 387w
Civil service manpower 166w
Complaints 166w
Departmental correspondence 167w
Members' correspondence 11w, 166w
Vacancies 11w

Milburn, Mr Alan, Minister of State, Dept of Health
Debates etc.
NHS, Freedom of expression (05.11.97) 373–6
Questions
A12 179w
Accident and emergency departments, Hospital admissions 180w
Barnsley Hospital, Private finance initiative 535w
Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust, Public appointments 76–7w, 435–6w, 665w
Beta-interferon, Complaints 179w
Beta-interferon, Expenditure 178–9w
Beta-interferon, Multiple sclerosis 184w
Bevan, Aneurin, Prescription charges 701–2
Birmingham Health Authority, Private finance initiative 431–2w
Community health services, Finance 433w
Community hospitals, Expenditure 599w
Community hospitals, Nurses 601–2w
Cosmetic surgery, Private health services 704–5
Dental services 535w
Dental services, North Staffordshire 430–1w
Dental services, Patients 182w
Dental services, Shropshire 536w
Dental services, Swindon 706
Dept of Health, Public expenditure 184w
Dept of Health, Tax assessment 184w
Diabetes, Medical equipment 187w
East Surrey Health Authority 535w
GP fundholders 181w, 535w

Milburn, Mr Alan—continued
GP fundholders, Devon 600w
GP fundholders, Private health services 542w
Health authorities, Contracts 350w
Health authorities, Debts 185w
Health authorities, Finance 534w
Health insurance, Tax allowances 185w
Health service staff, Industrial health and safety 538–9w
Health services, Finance 534w
Health services, Political refugees 435w
Hospital doctors, Performance appraisal 536w
Hospital patients 180–1w
Hospital waiting lists 187w, 348w, 537w
Hospital waiting lists, South West region 596–7w
Hospitals, Paint 350–1w
Hospitals, Private finance initiative 346w, 431w, 543–4w
National Blood Transfusion Service 78w, 694
National Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group 73–4w
NHS, Managers 543w
NHS, Millennium compliance 219–20w
NHS, Patients 347–8w
NHS, Public sector assets 347w
NHS, Racial discrimination 539w
NHS, Welfare to work 539w
NHS administration 536w, 693–4
NHS administration, Greater London 694–5
NHS charges, Low incomes 218w
NHS finance 179w, 436–8w, 543w
NHS finance, Labour costs 535w
NHS Supplies Authority, Contracts for services 661w
NHS trusts, Debts 185w
NHS trusts, Directors 380–1w
NHS trusts, Finance 597–9w
NHS trusts, Mergers 537w
NHS trusts, Parking 74w
NHS trusts, Pay 434w
NHS trusts, Property transfer 347w
NHS trusts, Public appointments 349–50w, 534w
North Derbyshire Health Authority 181w
North Essex Health Authority 680–1w
Nottingham Health Authority, Finance 434w
Prescription charges 349w
Prescription charges, Pensioners 701–2
Review of Health Care in London Independent Advisory Panel 77w
Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust 349w
Solihull Hospital 350w
Tax avoidance, Dept of Health 219w
Tax avoidance, NHS 184–5w

Military aircraft
Air accidents 318w
Costs 255w
Defence procurement 255w
Low flying 79w

Military exercises
Lincolnshire 580w

Military implementation force in Bosnia
5
Costs 83w

Military vehicles
Indonesia 266w

Milk Development Council
Taxation 573w

Mill Hill Broadway
Railway travel 139w

Millennium
559
Business 261w
Christianity 16–8
Church buildings 559–60
Education 465w

Millennium compliance
95w, 386w, 569w
Armed forces 109–10w
Banks 101w
Cabinet Office 96–7w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 107–8w
Dept for Education and Employment 163–4w
Dept for International Development 92–3w
Dept of Health 185–6w
Dept of Social Security 189–90w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 149–51w
Dept of Trade and Industry 126w, 244w, 298w
EC action 468w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 173–5w
Government departments 96w, 468–9w, 627w
Home Office 120–1w
Medical equipment 77–8w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 135–6w
Ministry of Defence 108–9w
NATO 109–10w
NHS 77–8w, 219–20w
Northern Ireland Office 177–8w
Scottish Office 158–9w
Treasury 621–2w
Welsh Office 130–1w

Millennium Exhibition
344–5w, 451w, 573w
Construction 451w
Consultants 609–10w
Contracts 451w, 534w
Disclosure of information 533w
Police 610w
Pricing 344w
Tourists 571–2
Transport infrastructure 570
Water transport 570–1

Millennium Fund
406w

Miller, Mr Andrew
Questions
Dept for Culture Media and Sport, Cash limits 208w

Mine Information and Training Centre
318w

Mines
898

Minimum wage
1025
Museums and galleries 562–3
New deal for young unemployed 308w
Tourist industry 560–2

Minister for Women
Press releases 593–4w

Minister Without Portfolio
Open government 464w

Ministerial and Other Salaries Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
Parliamentary procedure (05.11.97) 365
Royal Assent (06.11.97) 410

Ministerial duties
452w

Ministerial policy advisors
222w, 225w, 615–7w
Economic and monetary union 221–2w
Lord Chancellor's Dept 52w
Welsh Office 302–3

Ministerial responsibility
Small businesses 41–2w

Ministerial statements
Breast cancer (03.11.97) 19–28
Sustainable development (05.11.97) 315–32

Ministers
Electronic mail 441w
Scottish Executive 106
Travelling expenses 452w

Ministers' domestic visits
Wales 236w

Ministers' visits abroad
Dept of Health 544w
Dept of Social Security 532w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 479w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 502–4w
Home Office 642–4w
India 44–5w
Lord Chancellor's Dept 474w
Russia 261w
Welsh Office 520w

Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food
Developing countries trade 618w
Legislation 341w
Members' correspondence 137w
Millennium compliance 135–6w
Monitor Consultancy 363w
Public expenditure 514–5w
Regional panels [illegible]–5w
Tax avoidance [illegible]–2w
Taxation 341w

Ministry of Defence
Billing 114–5w
Cash limits 252–3w
Civil servants' visits abroad 495w
Exhibitions 612–3w
Government buildings 582w
Legislation 317w
Members' correspondence 113w
Millennium compliance 108–9w
New deal for young unemployed 688w
Official hospitality 495w
Public relations 580w
Tax avoidance 252w
Taxation 318w

Ministry of Defence Police
579–80w

Miscarriages of justice
Counselling 462w

Missing persons
Sri Lanka 265–6w

Mitchell, Mr Austin
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 718, 745, 783–6
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 975–7, 979
Legal aid scheme (05.11.97) 287–90, 293
Questions
ACP countries, Bananas 199–200w
Amsterdam Summit, UK delegations 561w
Bananas, Imports 131–3w
Competition Bill (HL) 1997/98 566w
Convention Relating to Extradition Between Member States of the EU, Parliamentary scrutiny of EC law 648–9w

Mitchell, Mr Austin—continued
Corruption, EC action 691w
Council of Ministers 560–1w
Council of Ministers, Codes of practice 561w
Development aid 313–4
EC law, Publicity 207w
Economic and monetary union 100w
Economic and monetary union, EC budget 99w
Economic and monetary union, Official publications 626w
Employment policy 128w
European Court of Justice, Treaty of Amsterdam 500–1w
European Police Office, EC law 691w
Fish conservation 332w
International Court of Justice, Nuclear weapons 81w
Lord Chancellor's Dept, Ministerial policy advisors 52w
Members' staff 123w
NHS finance, Labour costs 535w
Organised crime, EC action 690–1w
Treaty of Amsterdam 200w, 264w, 500w, 678w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Treaty on European Union 200w
World Trade Organisation, Bananas 242–3w

Mixed oxide fuel
Transport of radioactive materials 44w, 139–40w

Mobility allowance
Age 191–2w

Modern apprenticeships
528w

Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee
108, 110, 122w

Moffatt, Laura
Questions
Crawley Hospital, Hospital admissions 902

Monetary compensatory amounts
513w

Monetary Policy Committee
Interest rates 567w

Monitor Consultancy
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster 463–4w
Dept for Culture Media and Sport 466w
Dept for Education and Employment 446–7w
Dept of Health 437–8w
Dept of Social Security 377w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 367w
Home Office 374–5w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 363w
Northern Ireland Office 396w
Prime Minister 617w
Scottish Office 654–5w
Treasury 565–6w
Welsh Office 358w

Monopolies and Mergers Commission
Newsagents 243w

Monsanto
Church Commissioners 10w

Montserrat
Disasters 266w, 498–9w, 588–9w, 891–2
Hospitals 499w
Housing construction 499w, 890–1
Overseas aid 441w, 895
Refugees 499w, 895–6

Montserrat—continued
Ships 896

Monuments
Armed conflict 30–1w
Stormont 394w
World War II 309

Morgan, Mr Alasdair
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 405–6
Questions
Dounreay, Radioactive waste disposal 386–7
Low flying, Scotland 251w
Scottish National Sleep Laboratory 654w
Whisky, Scotland 154w

Morgan, Ms Julie
Questions
Voluntary work 1019

Morgan, Mr Rhodri
Questions
Montserrat, Disasters 588–9w
NHS, Millennium compliance 77–8w
NHS trusts, Wales 305–6

Morley
Magistrates' courts 572

Morley, Mr Elliot, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 205
Questions
Animal welfare, Prosecutions 363w
Bananas, Imports 131–4w
Battery hens, Animal welfare 382
Beef, Food consumption 516w
Coastal protection, Waveney 341w
Common fisheries policy 382–3
Countryside stewardship scheme, Access to countryside 339w
Countryside stewardship scheme, Arable farming 37w
Dioxins, Bolsover 330–1w
EC Fisheries Council 36–7w
Export of live animals 398–9w, 514w
Export of live animals, Horses 399w
Fish conservation 332w, 515w
Fishery agreements, EC budget 35–6w
Fishing quotas 383–4
Fishing vessels, Multiannual guidance programme 134w
Food industry 131w
Forestry Commission, Fox hunting 38w
Furs, Farms 137w
Genetically modified organisms, Potatoes 330w
Hill livestock allowances 330w, 515w
Legislation, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341w
Livestock, Animal welfare 332w
Members' correspondence, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 137w
Millennium compliance, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 135–6w
Monitor Consultancy, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 363w
Organic farming, EC grants and loans 234w
Pigs, Animal welfare 38w
Poultry, Animal welfare 137w
Public expenditure, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 514–5w
Rural areas 332w
Sheep premiums 514w
Tax avoidance, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341–2w
Taxation, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341w

Morley, Mr Elliot—continued
Total allowable catches 515–6w
Viticulture 332w

Morris, Ms Estelle, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept for Education andEmployment
Questions
Education of children at home 443–4w
Educational assessment 665w
Environmental education 666w
"Excellence For All Children Consultation Paper", Video recordings 309–10w
Literacy summer schools initiative 665–6w
Physical education, Tennis 446w
Pre-school education 666w, 668w
Pupil exclusions 528w
School admission 444w
School meals 162w
School meals, Derbyshire 161–2w
School milk 35w
Schools, Security 35w
Special education 702w, 1030–1
Special education, Teacher training 1030–1

Morris, Rt Hon John, Attorney-General
Questions
Crime victims 263w
Crown Prosecution Service 391–4
Crown Prosecution Service, Civil service manpower 391
Developing countries trade, Attorney General 684w
Extradition 264w
Government Property Lawyers 683–4w
Legislation, Attorney General 115w
Racial incitement 389–90
Sentencing, Appeals 264w, 390–1
Treasury Solicitor's Dept, Cash limits 193w

Mortgages
Income support 188w, 301w, 455w, 634–5w

Motor sports
Tobacco advertising 699

Motor vehicles
Export credit guarantees 377–8w

Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Questions
Forest Service 205–6w
Government information services, Northern Ireland 360–1w
Northern Ireland Information Service, Public appointments 396w

Mullin, Mr Chris
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 330–1
Questions
Animal welfare, Prosecutions 363w
Evidence, Disclosure of information 374w
Export of live animals 618w
Export of live animals, Sheep 618w
Feltham Young Offender Institution and Remand Centre, Prison discipline 119w
Judiciary, Secret societies 425w
Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission 153w
Taylor, Kevin, Greater Manchester Police 24w

Multiannual guidance programme
Fishing vessels 134w

Multilateral Agreement on Investment
569w, 629w

Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency
592w

Multiple occupation
64w

Multiple sclerosis
657–8w
Beta-interferon 184w
Medical treatments 183w

Murphy, Mr Jim
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 727–8
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 982–6

Murphy, Mr Paul, Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office
Questions
Beef premiums, Northern Ireland 396w
Billing, Northern Ireland Office 288–9w
Cattle, Northern Ireland 395–6w
Environment protection, Northern Ireland 394w
Homelessness, Northern Ireland 694w
Legislation, Northern Ireland Office 395w
Members' correspondence, Northern Ireland Office 289w
Millennium compliance, Northern Ireland Office 177–8w
Monitor Consultancy, Northern Ireland Office 396w
Northern Ireland Audit Review Group 8w
Northern Ireland Housing Executive, House renovation grants 176–7w
Stormont, Monuments 394w
Taxation, Northern Ireland Office 289w

Museums and galleries
405w
Minimum wage 562–3

Mutual recognition of qualifications
Accountants 473w

Myodil
596w, 658w

National Assembly of Wales
299–302
Education 299
Public transport 49–50w
Referendums 234–5w, 357–8w

National Audit Office
15–6
Disclosure of information 565w
House of Commons select committees 5–6w
Manpower 344w
Private finance initiative 16

National Blood Authority
542w
Redundancy pay 432w

National Blood Transfusion Service
78w, 542w, 694
Performance standards 705–6

National Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group
73–4w

National debt
221w

National grid for learning
668w

National insurance contributions
Employers' contributions 455w

National literacy strategy
667w

National Lottery
404–5w, 567–9
Health services 404w
Play facilities 404w
Primary education 2–3w
Sports facilities 2w, 466–7w
Tennis 466w

National Meat Hygiene Service
see Meat Hygiene Service

National parks
278–9w

National Railway Museum
Locomotives 610w

National Savings Agency
Blackpool 15–6w

National service
Sudan 560w

NATO
6–7, 167–8w
Armed forces officers 581w
Costs 6, 112w
Millennium compliance 109–10w
Nuclear weapons policy 7
Public appointments 581w

NATO joint exercises
83w

Nature conservation
Birds 619w

Nature reserves
Gwent levels 517w
Marine animals 278–9w

Navigation
Parliamentary procedure (12.11.97) 1007

Navy
Gulf States 113w
Laundries 82w

Naysmith, Dr Douglas
Questions
Higher education admission 226w
Witnesses 678w

Nazi victims
Banks 402w

New deal for lone parents
87w, 300w, 375–7w, 675–6w
Child care 633–4w
Gingerbread 376w
West Midlands 633w

New deal for young unemployed
32–3w, 667w, 1024–7, 1032–4
Mentally disadvantaged 97
Minimum wage 308w
Ministry of Defence 688w
Scotland 96–8
Wales 1027–8

New Millennium Experience
533w, 573w

New towns
General Certificate of Secondary Education 523–6w

Newsagents
Monopolies and Mergers Commission 243w

Newspaper press
Economic and monetary union 223w

NHS
Freedom of expression (05.11.97) 366–76
Managers 543w
Millennium compliance 77–8w, 219–20w
Patients 347–8w
Pay 695–7
Public sector assets 347w

NHS—continued
Racial discrimination 539w
Tax avoidance 184–5w
Welfare to work 539w

NHS administration
536w, 693–4
Greater London 694–5
Scotland 107

NHS charges
Low incomes 218w

NHS finance
179w, 312–3, 436–8w, 543w, 620w, 623w
Derbyshire 906
Labour costs 535w
Leicestershire 693
Private health services 430w
Scotland 156w
Trent 691
Wales 518w
Worcestershire 904

NHS Supplies Authority
Contracts for services 661w

NHS trusts
Blood transfusion services 348w
Debts 158w, 185w, 684–6w
Directors 380–1w
Finance 597–9w
Mergers 537w
Parking 74w
Pay 434w
Property transfer 347w
Public appointments 349–50w, 534w
Scotland 106–7, 158w
VAT 354w
Wales 305–6

Nicholls, Mr Patrick
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 825–7, 834–5, 844
Questions
Beef 389
Community hospitals, Cornwall 698
Welsh Office, Ministerial policy advisors 302–3

Noise control
Clubs 147–8w

Noise Induced Hearing Loss and War Pensions Review Group
248w, 635w

Non-departmental public bodies
Accountability 463w

Non-indictable offences
Criminal proceedings (05.11.97) 337–42

Norman, Mr Archie
Questions
Church schools 521–2w
Grammar schools 445w
Local government finance 505–6w
National Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group 73–4w

Norris, Dan
Questions
Asbestos 57w
School admission 444w

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
see NATO

North Derbyshire Health Authority
181w

North Essex Health Authority
680–1w

North Staffordshire
Dental services 430–1w

North Wales
Foreign investment in UK 129–30w
Police 21w

North West region
Blood transfusion services 706

Northern Ireland
Access to Neighbouring Land Act 1992 98w
Armed forces deployment 324–5w
Armed forces housing 322w
Armed forces strength 323–4w
Beef premiums 396w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 395–6w
Cattle 395–6w
Children 358–60w
Civil proceedings 695w
Crimes of violence 204w
Demonstrations 693w
Detention centres 293–4w
Electricity tariffs 394w
Environment protection 394w
Government Communications Headquarters 265w
Government information services 360–1w
Homelessness 694w
Internal security operations 293–4w
Preparatory schools 288w
Prisoners' transfers 304–5w
Radiation hazards 7w, 395w
School admission 8w
Security 292–3w
Social security payments 202–4w
Supermarkets 7w
Surveillance 320w
War widows' pensions 8w

Northern Ireland Audit Review Group
8w

Northern Ireland government
309

Northern Ireland Grand Committee
(06.11.97) 466

Northern Ireland health and social services boards
694w
Capitation Formula Review Group 693–4w
Debts 206w
Directors 588w
Public appointments 586–8w

Northern Ireland health and social services trusts
694w
Debts 205–6w

Northern Ireland Housing Executive
House renovation grants 176–7w

Northern Ireland Information Service
Public appointments 396w

Northern Ireland Office
Billing 288–9w
Legislation 395w
Members' correspondence 289w
Millennium compliance 177–8w
Monitor Consultancy 396w
Taxation 289w

Northern Ireland Tourist Board
Holiday accommodation 583–6w

Nottingham Health Authority
Finance 434w

Nuclear Accident Response Organisation
580w

Nuclear accidents
Chernobyl 593w

Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill (HL) 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R and Money res* (06.11.97) 455–66

Nuclear fuel reprocessing
THORP 297w

Nuclear power
Carbon dioxide 570w
Fossil fuel levy (05.11.97) 343–64

Nuclear safety
EC law 485w
Russia 630w
Space technology 378w

Nuclear weapons
Emergency planning 580–1w
International Court of Justice 81w, 637w
Iraq 388w
Transport of radioactive materials 580w
UN Committee on Disarmament and International Security 168w

Nuclear weapons policy
3–4
NATO 7

Nurses
Community hospitals 601–2w

Nursing homes
Inspections 596w

***O'Brien, Mr Mike**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Home Office*
Questions
Departmental correspondence 459w, 646w
Deportation, Elderly 22–3w
Deportation, Illegal immigrants 368–9w
Deportation, Immigrants' dependants 22w
Entry clearances, Immigration rules 211–2w
Ethnic minorities, Government grants to local authorities 644w
Eurostar, Immigration controls 691–2w
Greenhouse effect, Home Office 647–8w
Gypsies, Eastern Europe 27–8w
Home Office, Members' constituency work 29w
Human rights 415–6w
Immigrant detainees 644–6w
Immigrant detainees, Members' constituency work 24w
Immigrant detainees, Police custody 368w
Immigrants' dependants, Immigration rules 29w
Immigration 29w
Immigration and Nationality Division, Immigration applications 371–2w
Immigration and Nationality Division, Manpower 654w
Immigration applications, Administrative delays 408–9w
Immigration applications, Fraud 651–2w
Immigration applications, Wealth 407–8w
Immigration controls, Reviews 21–2w
Immigration officers, East Midlands Airport 371w
Immigration Service (Airports), Finance 371w
Immigration Service (Airports), Manpower 370–1w
Members' correspondence 374w, 646w
Political refugees 18w, 26w, 416–8w, 652–3w
Political refugees, Algeria 19w
Political refugees, Barnet 209w
Political refugees, Czech Republic 18–20w
Political refugees, Deportation 209w, 369w
Political refugees, Immigrant detainees 18–20w
Political refugees, Pakistan 21w

***O'Brien, Mr Mike**—continued*
Racial harassment 286w
UK passport holders, Republic of Ireland 30w
Visas 24w

O'Brien, Mr William
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 346, 354, 358–9
Questions
Cabinet Office, Cash limits 208–9w
Common agricultural policy 377
Environment Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee 112
Government grants to local authorities 58–60w
Local government services, Per capita costs 68–9w
Magistrates' courts, West Yorkshire 207w
Standard spending assessments 61–2w
Territorial Army 2

Office equipment
Office of Fair Trading 243w

Office for Standards in Education
Operating costs 308w

Office of Fair Trading
Office equipment 243w

Office of Public Service
Cash limits 216w

Office of the Banking Ombudsman
see Banking Ombudsman

Office of Water Services
Public appointments 603w

Officer Training Corps
254w

Official engagements
567w

Official hospitality
Admiralty House 342–3w
Dept for Education and Employment 530w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 138w
Dorneywood 18w
Home Office 640–1w
Ministry of Defence 495w
Welsh Office 519–20w

Official publications
Economic and monetary union 626w
Gold and foreign exchange reserves 566w

Official secrets
Disclosure of information 260w

"Offsets in Defence Trade 1997"
627w

O'Hara, Mr Edward
Questions
Beef, Public opinion 387–8
Jazz 406w

Olner, Mr Bill
Questions
European fighter aircraft 11–2
Ministry of Defence, Government buildings 582w

One parent benefit
87–9w

O'Neill, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 165

Open government
Minister Without Portfolio 464w

Opencast mining
69w

Opera
406w

Opik, Mr Lembit
Debates etc.
A5 (05.11.97) 285
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 252–3, 262–3
Rural areas (04.11.97) 190
Student grants (04.11.97) 146, 155
Questions
Cost per student, Wales 238w
Countryside Council for Wales 238w
Montserrat, Disasters 891–2
National Assembly of Wales, Public transport 49–50w
Official engagements 567w
Railway industry, Performance standards 269w
Rural transport, Wales 48–9w
School milk 35w
Student loans, Part-time education 307w
Welsh Development Agency 297

Opposition days
Rural areas (04.11.97) 176–220
Student grants (04.11.97) 118–75

Orange badge scheme
54w, 606w

Orders and regulations
Dept of Trade and Industry 43–4w

Ordnance Survey
Cash limits 195w

Organ, Mrs Diana
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 856, 867

Organ donors
663w

Organic farming
EC grants and loans 234w

Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
169w

Organised crime
EC action 690–1w

Organophosphorous pesticides
614w

Orthopaedics
658w

Ottaway, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 594–5, 603, 619, 664–9
Police (14.11.97) 1140–1, 1152
Questions
Community health services, Finance 433w
Ministers' visits abroad, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 479w

Overseas aid
592w, 893–4
Belarus 638w
Bosnia-Herzegovina 592w
Ethiopia 93w
Human rights 589w
Montserrat 441w, 895
Palestinians 897
Papua New Guinea 94w
Personal loans 588w
Somalia 894
Sudan 638w
Tibet 591w
Welfare to work 889

Overseas investment
507w
Palestinians 897–8

Overseas students
Student numbers 310w, 444–5w

Overseas trade
Bangladesh 297w
China 630–1w
Currencies 101–2w
India 44w, 401w
Pakistan 45w
Yemen 631–2w

Oxford University
Higher education administration 447–8w
Private education 448w
University finance 448w
Wealth 448w

Ozone layer
Antarctic 266w

Packaging
Recycling 489–90w

Page, Mr Richard
Questions
Coal, Air pollution 42–3w
Greenbelt, Hertfordshire 309–10
Small businesses, Billing 42w
Social security claims, Student loans 675w

Paice, Mr James
Questions
Agriculture, Scotland 155w
Beef premiums, Northern Ireland 396w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Disease control 365w
Countryside stewardship scheme, Arable farming 37w
EC Agriculture Council 235w
Forestry Commission, Fox hunting 38w
Hill farming 384–5
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, Regional panels 363–5w
School meals 381w
Toxicity of Chemicals in Food Consumer Products and the Environment Committee, Vitamin B6 38–9w
Tuberculosis in Cattle and Badgers Review 39w

Paint
Hospitals 350–1w

Pakistan
Overseas trade 45w
Political refugees 21w

Palestinians
Overseas aid 897
Overseas investment 897–8

Palmer, Dr Nick
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 484, 494, 502–3, 526, 529–31
Questions
Environmental health 700

Paper
Recycling 489w

Paper industry
Waste disposal 147w

Papua New Guinea
Overseas aid 94w

Paracetamol
657w
Death 508–9w
Suicide 508w

Parent plus
376–7w

Parenting orders
643–4w

Parking
NHS trusts 74w

Parliament and government
110

Parliamentary buildings
Scottish Parliament 157–8w

Parliamentary constituencies
Wales 237w

Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund
(13.11.97) 1049–60

Parliamentary procedure
Navigation (12.11.97) 1007

Parliamentary questions
Disclosure of information 121w

Parliamentary recess
122w

Parliamentary reform
Legislative process 108

Parliamentary scrutiny of EC law
Convention on Simplified Extradition Procedure 648–9w
Convention Relating to Extradition Between Member States of the EU 648–9w

Parole
Scotland 101–2

Part-time education
Access funds 307w, 522–3w
Student loans 307w
Tuition fees 308–9w, 556w

Party conferences
Security 373–4w

Passengers
Eurostar 477w
Railway safety 69w
Railway travel 438–40w

Passports
Republic of Ireland 199w

Patents
472–3w
Biotechnology 127w

Paterson, Mr Owen
Debates etc.
A5 (05.11.97) 279–82, 284
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 991–2
Parliamentary questions, Points of order (04.11.97) 114
Questions
Bovine tuberculosis, Badgers 385

Patients
Dental services 182w
NHS 347–8w

Peace keeping operations
82w
Territorial Army 81w

Peace negotiations
Middle East 498w
Sri Lanka 170w
Sudan 560w

Pearson, Mr Ian
Questions
Transport policy 905–6

Pedestrians
Road accidents 606w

Pensioners
Means tested benefits 249–50w

Pensioners—continued
Prescription charges 701–2

Pensions
Advisory services 595w
Clergy 10w, 18
Divorce 595w
Social security reciprocal agreements 190–1w

Pensions review
89–90w

Performance appraisal
Hospital doctors 536w

Perjury
559w

Personal loans
Overseas aid 588w

Personal savings
Taxation 100w, 355w

Personal social services
Government grants to local authorities 679–80w

Pesticide residues
Food contamination 35w

Physical education
Tennis 446w, 669w

Pickles, Mr Eric
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 590–1, 617, 642, 644, 654–8
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 685–6

Pickthall, Mr Colin
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 63
Rural areas (04.11.97) 201–3
Questions
Beef, Public opinion 387
Business questions 1047–8
Further education 903
House of Commons debates 109–10
Office of Public Service, Cash limits 216w

Pigs
Animal feed 38w
Animal welfare 38w

Pike, Mr Peter L
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 402
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1080–2
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1058
Rural areas (04.11.97) 190
Questions
Capital receipts initiative 63w
Clergy, Pensions 18
Cold weather payments 308
European fighter aircraft 78w
Health of the Nation 699–700
Millennium 559
Rent Officer Service Agency 198w

Planning appeals
Land use 550w

Planning blight
70w

Planning inquiries
White Rock Business Park Paignton 152w

Planning permission
Catering 554w
Crime prevention 275w
Public houses 275w
Public utilities 275w

Planning permission—continued
Racial discrimination 550w, 552w
Sports Council for England 550–1w
Take-away food shops 275w
Telecommunications technology 70–1w, 152–3w, 274w, 491–3w

Plaskitt, Mr James
Questions
Insurance premium tax 101w

Play facilities
National Lottery 404w

Plutonium
Radioactive waste disposal 296–7w

Polegate bypass
Compensation 195w

Police
Contracts for services 560w
EC countries 391w
Ethnic minorities 462–4w
Greater London (14.11.97) 1137–58
Manpower 211w, 462–4w, 688w
Millennium Exhibition 610w
North Wales 21w
Performance standards 29w, 559–60w
Wales 688w

Police Act 1997
Questions
211w

Police custody
Death 412w
Immigrant detainees 368w

Police deaths on duty
Fletcher, Yvonne 122w

Police discipline
372–3w

Police equipment
Chemical weapons 316–7w, 459w

Police stations
Coleraine 8w

Political parties
Finance 899–901, 1026

Political refugees
18w, 26w, 416–8w, 652–3w
Algeria 19w
Barnet 209w
Czech Republic 18–20w
Deportation 209w, 369w
Government grants to local authorities 75–6w
Health services 435w
Immigrant detainees 18–20w
Pakistan 21w
Slovakia 18–20w
Social security benefits 85w, 190w

Polling stations
Access to buildings 647w
Schools 375w

Pollution control
Lighting 272w

Polymers
Food 483w

Pond, Mr Chris
Debates etc.
River Thames, Sea navigation (05.11.97) 271–5
Questions
Common agricultural policy 331w
Earnings rules 635–6w
War pensions, Earnings rules 84w

Poole Harbour bridge
(12.11.97) 1008–16

Population
Essex 697–9w

Population projection
Households 56w, 63w, 607w

Porton Down
Cortecs International 317w

Ports
Dover (11.11.97) 817–24
River Wear 402w

Portsmouth
Employment Service 160–1w

Post offices
Electricity meters 573w

Postal services
House of Commons 400w

Post-operative care
Scotland 48w

Potatoes
Genetically modified organisms 330w

Poultry
Animal welfare 137w

Pound, Mr Stephen
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 935–7
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 606–10, 663
Police (14.11.97) 1194–7

Prentice, Ms Bridget, An Assistant Whip
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 542

Prentice, Mr Gordon
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 624
Rural areas (04.11.97) 177
Questions
Advertising controls, Local authority powers 479w
Aitken, Jonathan 211w, 557–8w
Australia, Republicanism 202w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 331w
Business questions 1047
Chiropody 661w
Civil list, Ethnic minorities 464w
Computer privacy 461w
Dental services 535w
Domestic gas appliances, Death 559w
Housing stock, East Lancashire 695–6w
Lord Chancellor's Dept, Electronic mail 679w
Millennium Exhibition, Contracts 451w
National Railway Museum, Locomotives 610w
Patents 472–3w
Perjury 559w

Preparatory schools
Northern Ireland 288w

Pre-school education
666w, 668w
Pupil-teacher ratios 33w
School population 33–4w
Scotland 154w
Wales 236w

Prescott, Rt Hon John, Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment Transport and the Regions
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 665

Prescott, Rt Hon John—continued
Questions
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions, Cash limits 195–7w
Environmental policy, Cabinet committees 60w, 546w

Prescription charges
349w
Bevan, Aneurin 701–2
Pensioners 701–2

President of the Council
Electronic mail 609w

Press releases
Dept of Health 659w
Dept of Social Security 593–4w
Government departments 659w
Minister for Women 593–4w

Pricing
Air fares 241–2w
Consumer protection 243w
Millennium Exhibition 344w

Primarolo, Ms Dawn, Financial Secretary to the Treasury
Questions
Betting and gaming duties 623–4w
Betting and gaming duties, Tax yields 624w
Duty free allowances 260w
Gaming clubs, Licensing 624w
Income tax 387w, 620–1w
Income tax, Tax allowances 510w
Inheritance tax, Tax thresholds 623w
Insurance premium tax 101w
Marginal tax rates 564–5w
National Audit Office, Disclosure of information 565w
Tax and Benefits Task Force 259w
Tax harmonisation, EC countries 258w, 509w
Tax rates and bands 565w
Tax yields 510w
Taxation, Married people 565w
Taxation, Quarrying 260w
Taxation, Voting methods 100w
VAT, Energy conservation 511w, 566w, 625w
VAT, Historic buildings 258w
VAT, NHS trusts 354w

Primary education
Class sizes 155w
National Lottery 2–3w

Prime Minister
Developing countries trade 617w
Interest groups 675w
Monitor Consultancy 617w

Princess of Wales
Funerals 3w

Prior, Mr David
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 490–1, 504, 531–2
Questions
Army, Defence review 80w
Housing construction, Wales 303
Labour Party, Finance 906
Uniform business rate 483w
World Bank, Developing countries 590–1w

Priority routes
Road accidents 148w

Prison discipline
Feltham Young Offender Institution and Remand Centre 119w

Prison employment
688–9w

Prison medical services
414w, 651w

Prison population
409–11w
Lewes Prison 30w
Scotland 101–2

Prison Service
423–4w
Annual reports 639w

Prison staff
Group 4 Securitas 647w

Prison visitors
Public appointments 23w

Prisoner escapes
Birmingham Prison 640w

Prisoners
Scotland 305w

Prisoners on remand
28w, 413w
Mentally disturbed offenders 654w
Trials 413w

Prisoners' transfers
Campbell, Jason 95–6, 303–4w
Northern Ireland 304–5w
Republic of Ireland 26w

Prisons
Colchester 118w, 689w
Construction 689w
Drug abuse 415w
Essex 419w
Group 4 Securitas 692w
Private finance initiative 154w, 692w

Private bills
House of Commons standing orders (13.11.97) 1017–8

Private education
Cambridge University 448w
Oxford University 448w

Private finance initiative
103w
Barnsley Hospital 535w
Birmingham Health Authority 431–2w
Edinburgh Royal Infirmary NHS Trust 47w
Home Office 649–50w
Hospitals 103, 346w, 431–2w, 543–4w
National Audit Office 16
Prisons 154w, 692w
Road construction 195w
Road transport 480w
Western General Hospital NHS Trust 303w

Private health services
Cosmetic surgery 704–5
GP fundholders 542w
NHS finance 430w

Private investment
London Underground 67w

Private roads
(03.11.97) 86–94

Privatisation
Bus services 146w

Probation officers
Professional qualifications 115–6w

Procedure Select Committee
(07.11.97) 542

Professional qualifications
Probation officers 115–6w

Prohibition of Bull Bars Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
1R (04.11.97) 116–7

Property transfer
Council housing 145w
Defence land 316w
NHS trusts 347w

Proscribed organisations
Crimes of violence 204w

Prosecutions
Animal welfare 363w
Gas safety 559w

Prosser, Mr Gwyn
Debates etc.
Ports, Dover (11.11.97) 817–20
Questions
Merchant ships, Ship chartering 577–9w

Protection from Harassment Act 1997
Questions
97–8w

Psychology
Medical malpractice 352w

Public appointments
261w
Basildon and Thurrock General Hospitals NHS Trust 76–7w, 435–6w, 665w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 273w
European Court of Justice 501w
Gaming Board for Great Britain 25w
Hampshire Constabulary 411–2w
Health authorities 349–50w
NATO 581w
NHS trusts 349–50w, 534w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards 586–8w
Northern Ireland Information Service 396w
Office of Water Services 603w
Prison visitors 23w
Southern Health and Social Services Board 204w, 586w

Public bodies
VAT 354w

Public expenditure
224w, 259w, 386–7w, 622–3w
Dept of Health 184w
Dept of Social Security 247w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 514–5w
Scotland 155w
Supply estimates 224w

Public footpaths
279w
Local authority powers 279w

Public Health Laboratory Service
179–80w

Public houses
Planning permission 275w

Public inquiries
Road construction 475–6w

Public libraries
Publicity 466w

Public opinion
385–6w
Beef 387–8

Public order offences
Belfast 292w

Public order policing
Warehouse parties 215w

Public records
474–5w

Public relations
Ministry of Defence 580w

Public sector assets
NHS 347w

Public sector debt
Economic and monetary union 504–5w

Public sector earnings
259w

Public telephones
56–7w

Public transport
Local authorities 269w
National Assembly of Wales 49–50w
Wales 305–6w

Public utilities
Planning permission 275w
Road works 482w

Publicity
Dept for Education and Employment 530–1w
EC law 207w
Economic and monetary union 221w
Home Office 641–2w
Public libraries 466w
Welsh Office 520–1w

Pupil exclusions
528w

Pupil-teacher ratios
Pre-school education 33w

Quadrant Catering
45w

Quarrying
Taxation 260w

Queen Mary's University Hospital
(14.11.97) 1208–16

Quin, Ms Joyce, Minister of State, Home Office
Questions
Birmingham Prison, Prisoner escapes 640w
Body searches 287w
Category A prisoners 415w
Corruption, EC action 691w
Feltham Young Offender Institution and Remand Centre, Prison discipline 119w
Group 4 Securitas, Prison staff 647w
Group 4 Securitas, Prisons 692w
Leeds Prison, Suicide 690w
Lewes Prison, Prison population 30w
Life imprisonment 415w
McNamee, Danny 414w
Miscarriages of justice, Counselling 462w
Organised crime, EC action 690–1w
Prison employment 688–9w
Prison medical services 414w, 651w
Prison population 409–11w
Prison visitors, Public appointments 23w
Prisoners on remand 28w, 413w
Prisoners on remand, Mentally disturbed offenders 654w
Prisoners on remand, Trials 413w
Prisons, Colchester 118w, 689w
Prisons, Construction 689w
Prisons, Drug abuse 415w
Prisons, Essex 419w
Probation officers, Professional qualifications 115–6w
Wellingborough Prison, Death 414w

Quinn, Mr Lawrie
Questions
Political parties, Finance 899–900

Race Relations Act 1976
Questions
550w

Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997
Questions
358–60w

Racial discrimination
Armed forces 449–50w
NHS 539w
Planning permission 550w, 552w

Racial harassment
286w

Racial incitement
389–90

Radiation hazards
Northern Ireland 7w, 395w
Telecommunications technology 7w, 395w

Radice, Mr Giles
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 717–8, 744–8, 759, 765, 767–8, 797
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 917, 926, 930, 944

Radio
Cable systems 44w
Commercial broadcasting 257w

Radio broadcasting licences
566–7
West Midlands 404w

Radio programmes
Children 257w, 565

Radioactive waste disposal
55–6w, 485w
Dounreay 386–7, 496w
Plutonium 296–7w
Sea pollution 386
Sellafield 55w

Radioactivity
Land pollution 274w

RAF Menwith Hill
450w

RAF Signals Engineering Establishment
319w

Railway freight transport
71w
Track access grant 486w

Railway industry
Government grants 67–8w
Performance standards 269w

Railway network
Channel tunnel 477w

Railway safety
Passengers 69w

Railway transport
Regulatory systems 282w

Railway travel
Mill Hill Broadway 139w
Passengers 438–40w
Performance standards 280–1w
Safety measures 69–70w

Rain forests
Indonesia 591w

Rammell, Mr Bill
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 956–60, 983
Student grants (04.11.97) 161
Questions
Indonesia, Rain forests 591w

Randall, Mr John
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 627–9
Police (14.11.97) 1177–8

Rapson, Mr Syd
Questions
Defence industries 4

Raynsford, Mr Nick, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 586–95, 597–8, 600, 615, 634, 666–7
Local Government (Contracts) Bill, Lords amendts (11.11.97) 810–5
Town and country planning, Maidenhead (12.11.97) 883–8
Questions
Advertising controls, Local authority powers 479w
Bed and breakfast accommodation, Families 66–7w
Best value 479–80w
Building regulations, Access to buildings 477–8w
Capital receipts initiative 63w
Capital receipts initiative, London boroughs 65w
Chelmsford Borough Council, Advance corporation tax 480–1w
Compulsory purchase 699–700w
Council house rents 698w
Council housing, Bromsgrove 484–5w
Council housing, Building repairs 145–6w
Council housing, Property transfer 145w
Council tax, London boroughs 546w
Demolition, Town and country planning 551–2w
Derbyshire County Council, Revenue support grant 197w
Derelict land 485–6w
Development plans 57w, 274w
Educational finance, Derbyshire 141–2w
Family income, Advisory services 64w
Government grants to local authorities 58–60w
Greenbelt 54w
Greenbelt, Housing construction 483–4w
Homelessness 547–9w
Households, Population projection 56w, 63w, 607w
Housing, London boroughs 65w
Housing, Research 268w
Housing, Town and country planning 68w
Housing associations, Housing cooperatives 485w
Housing construction, Essex 554w, 697–8w
Housing construction, Land pollution 609w
Housing Corporation, Directors 484w
Housing stock, East Lancashire 695–6w
Leasehold Valuation Tribunal, Administrative delays 271–2w
Leisure facilities, Town and country planning 481w
Local government finance, Capital investment 476–7w
Local government finance, Education vouchers 147w
Local government reform, Costs 482w
Local government revenue 278w
Local government services, Per capita costs 68–9w
Ministers' visits abroad, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 479w
Multiple occupation 64w

Raynsford, Mr Nick—continued
Opencast mining 69w
Ordnance Survey, Cash limits 195w
Planning appeals, Land use 550w
Planning blight 70w
Planning permission, Catering 554w
Planning permission, Crime prevention 275w
Planning permission, Public houses 275w
Planning permission, Public utilities 275w
Planning permission, Racial discrimination 550w, 552w
Population, Essex 697–9w
Public telephones 56–7w
Rented housing 54–5w
Revenue support grant 62w
Revenue support grant, Local education authorities 140–1w
Rural areas, Town and country planning 273w
Rural transport 54w
Sports Council for England, Planning permission 550–1w
Standard spending assessments 61–2w, 65w
Structure plans 57w, 272w
Telecommunications technology, Colchester 493w
Telecommunications technology, Planning permission 70–1w, 274w, 491–3w
Tenant eviction 603w
Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 603–4w
Uniform business rate 483w

Reading
Government buildings 2w

Reading Borough Council
Members' correspondence 386w

Reardon, Steve
Information officers 453–4w

Recruitment
Government Communications Headquarters 265w
Scottish Prison Service 305w

Recycling
491–2w
Air pollution control 490–1w
Packaging 489–90w
Paper 489w

Redundancy
Teachers 310w, 445–6w

Redundancy pay
National Blood Authority 432w

Redwood, Rt Hon John
Questions
British Nuclear Fuels 43w
Coal mine closures 245w
Dept of Trade and Industry, Orders and regulations 43–4w
Office of Fair Trading, Office equipment 243w
Tin, Cornwall 124w

Reed, Mr Andrew
Questions
New deal for young unemployed 1026–7

Reeves Advisory Group
see National Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group

Referendums
Greater London Authority 375w
National Assembly of Wales 234–5w, 357–8w
Scotland 155w
Western Sahara 176w

Refugees
391w
Democratic Republic of the Congo 167w
Iran 591w
Montserrat 499w, 895–6

Refuse disposal
Hazardous wastes 31w

Reg(EEC)2078/92
234w

Regional airports
63–4w

Regional challenge
126w

Regional development agencies
148w
Voluntary organisations 482w

Regional government
607w

Regional panels
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 363–5w

Regional planning and development
EC action 555w

Registry of Friendly Societies
Cash limits 223w

Regulation of Wet Bikes Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
1R (11.11.97) 709–10

Regulatory systems
Bus services 294–5w
Railway transport 282w
Telecommunications industry 568w

Reid, Dr John, Minister for the Armed Forces
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 836–45
Questions
Armed forces, Career structure 110w
Armed forces, Complaints 320–1w
Armed forces, Drunkenness 79w
Armed forces, Employment discrimination 613w
Armed forces, Racial discrimination 449–50w
Armed forces deployment, Northern Ireland 324–5w
Armed forces housing, Northern Ireland 322w
Armed forces medical services 78–9w
Armed Forces Personnel Administration Agency 611–2w
Armed forces recruitment 78w
Armed forces reserves, Defence review 2–3
Armed forces storage depots 611w
Armed forces strength, Northern Ireland 323–4w
Armed forces training 494–5w, 576w
Armed forces training, Kenya 494w
Army, Defence review 80w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Ministry of Defence 495w
Defence Codification Agency 319w
Defence equipment 251w
Defence expenditure 83–4w
Defence review 80–2w, 361w
826 squadron 576–7w
Guided weapons 83w
Gulf War syndrome 15
Gulf War syndrome, Medical research 14
Helicopters, Armed forces 582w
HMS Tiger 582w
Hussein, Saddam 1162

Reid, Dr John—continued
Information warfare 614w
International Court of Justice, Nuclear weapons 81w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict, Armed forces civilians 82w
Legislation, Ministry of Defence 317w
Marines 81w
Merchant ships, Ship chartering 577–9w
Military implementation force in Bosnia, Costs 83w
Mine Information and Training Centre 318w
Ministry of Defence, Cash limits 252–3w
Ministry of Defence, New deal for young unemployed 688w
Ministry of Defence, Public relations 580w
Ministry of Defence Police 579–80w
NATO, Armed forces officers 581w
NATO, Costs 112w
NATO, Public appointments 581w
Navy, Gulf States 113w
Navy, Laundries 82w
Nuclear Accident Response Organisation 580w
Nuclear weapons, Emergency planning 580–1w
Nuclear weapons, Transport of radioactive materials 580w
Officer Training Corps 254w
Official hospitality, Ministry of Defence 495w
Organophosphorous pesticides 614w
Peace keeping operations 82w
RAF Menwith Hill 450w
RAF Signals Engineering Establishment 319w
Royal Fleet Auxiliary, Foreigners 82w
Royal Irish Regiment 322–4w
Royal yacht 361w
Stabilisation Force in Bosnia 81w, 83w
Surveillance, Northern Ireland 320w
Tax avoidance, Ministry of Defence 252w
Taxation, Ministry of Defence 318w
Territorial Army 1–2, 81w, 580w
Territorial Army, Armed forces women 3
Territorial Army, Pay 579w
Territorial Army, Peace keeping operations 81w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 14–5, 1159–64
WE 177 nuclear bomb 581w
World War I, Anniversaries 12–4

Religious Discrimination Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
1R (13.11.97) 1048

Religious freedom
Russia 261w

Remand in custody
116–7w
Young offenders 213–5w

Rendel, Mr David
Questions
Family benefits, Social security benefits reductions 84–5w
Lone parent premium 89w
Lone parents, Family premium 88–9w
Lone parents, Income support 87w
Lone parents, Social security recipients 88w
New deal for lone parents 87w

Rent Officer Service Agency
198w

Rented housing
54–5w

Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
1R (12.11.97) 908–9

Republic of Ireland
Passports 199w
Prisoners' transfers 26w
UK passport holders 30w, 407w

Republicanism
Australia 202w

Research finance
Animal experiments 284w
Higher education 31w
Universities 1033–4

Residential care
Rowntree 433w
Scotland 156w

Restrictive trade practices
593w, 892
Tobacco industry 892–3

Retail prices index
Retirement pensions 247w

Retail trade
Solvent abuse 25w

Retirement age
Clergy 18

Retirement pensions
594w
Retail prices index 247w
Women 594–5w

Revenue support grant
62w
Derby City Council 197w
Derbyshire Constabulary 210w
Derbyshire County Council 197w
Local education authorities 140–1w

Review of Health Care in London Independent Advisory Panel
77w

Reviews
Immigration controls 21–2w
Intelligence services 566w

Revolutions
Cuba 362w

River Dee
Bridges 48w

River Thames
Sea navigation (05.11.97) 271–8

River Wear
Ports 402w

Rivers
Safety measures 138w

Road accidents
Drinking and driving 480w
Eyesight 366w
Pedestrians 606w
Priority routes 148w

Road construction
Essex (12.11.97) 875–80
M11 546w
Private finance initiative 195w
Public inquiries 475–6w
Wales 236w

Road finance
Wales 519w

Road freight transport
Compensation 52–3w, 552w
EC countries 53w, 267–8w

Road safety
(05.11.97) 229–48
Road safety—continued
A449 604w

Road tolls
366–7w

Road traffic
Greater London 151w

Road transport
Private finance initiative 480w

Road works
A66 695w
Bridges 272–3w
Cable television 402–3w
Local government expenditure 275–7w
Public utilities 482w
Trees 483w

Roads
East Sussex (04.11.97) 221–8

Robathan, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 32, 35–6, 59
Housing construction (12.11.97) 848–9
Questions
Cardiff Bay barrage 237w
Class sizes 666w
Millennium Exhibition, Water transport 570–1
Sports, Handicapped 566
Territorial Army 81w

***Robertson, Rt Hon George**, Secretary of State for Defence*
Questions
Armed forces 10–1
Bosnia-Herzegovina, Defence expenditure 5–6
Defence expenditure 10
Defence procurement 12
Defence review 79w, 581w
Defence review, Foreign policy 11
European fighter aircraft 11–2
Military implementation force in Bosnia 5
Ministry of Defence, Government buildings 582w
NATO 6–7
NATO, Costs 6
NATO, Nuclear weapons policy 7
Nuclear weapons policy 3–4
Stabilisation Force in Bosnia 5
Trident, Defence procurement 450w
Trident, Defence review 4, 450w

Robertson, Mr Laurence
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 403
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 957, 990
Questions
Common agricultural policy 331w
Criminal proceedings, Scotland 95
Handguns, Compensation 418w
Hedges and ditches 150w
Insurance premium tax 101w
Legal advice and assistance 426w
Legal aid 425–6w
Members' correspondence, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 108w
Members' correspondence, Dept for Education and Employment 164w
Members' correspondence, Dept of Health 186w
Members' correspondence, Dept of Social Security 248w
Members' correspondence, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 151–2w
Members' correspondence, Dept of Trade and Industry 401w
Robertson, Mr Laurence—continued
Members' correspondence, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 171w
Members' correspondence, Home Office 120w
Members' correspondence, Lord Chancellor's Dept 98w
Members' correspondence, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 137w
Members' correspondence, Ministry of Defence 113w
Members' correspondence, Northern Ireland Office 289w
Members' correspondence, Treasury 564w
Mines 898
Pensions, Social security reciprocal agreements 190–1w
Welsh assembly 234w

***Robinson, Mr Geoffrey**, Paymaster General*
Questions
Charities, Investment income 355w
Developing countries trade, Treasury 625w
Local government finance 505–6w
Personal savings, Taxation 100w, 355w
Private finance initiative 103w
Windfall tax, Water and sewerage companies 505w

***Roche, Mrs Barbara**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Dept of Trade and Industry*
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 481–95, 497–9, 520, 536–42
Questions
Arms exports, Export licensing 629–30w
Assisted areas 564w
Billing, Small businesses 41w
Business, EC enlargement 126–7w
Business Link 378w
Business Link, Government grants 295–6w
Business Link, Small businesses 296w
Cable systems, Radio 44w
Cable television, Road works 402–3w
Dept of Trade and Industry, Civil service manpower 45w
European strategic programme for research in information, Schools 245w
Export licensing, Compensation 568–9w
Export licensing, Data banks 569w
Facsimile transmission 45w
Millennium compliance 569w
Millennium compliance, Dept of Trade and Industry 126w, 244w, 298w
Millennium compliance, EC action 468w
Millennium compliance, Government departments 468–9w
Multilateral Agreement on Investment 569w, 629w
Overseas trade, Bangladesh 297w
Overseas trade, China 630–1w
Overseas trade, India 44w
Overseas trade, Pakistan 45w
Overseas trade, Yemen 631–2w
Small businesses 40w
Small businesses, Billing 42w
Small businesses, Government grants 298–9w
Small businesses, Ministerial responsibility 41–2w
Small businesses, Staffordshire 125w
Small businesses, Tamworth 39–40w
Tax avoidance, Dept of Trade and Industry 402w
Taxation, Dept of Trade and Industry 627–9w
Trade fairs, Defence equipment 692w
Trade missions, Yemen 125w
Trade promotion, Yemen 569–70w

Roche, Mrs Barbara—continued
UK companies abroad, India 45w
UK companies abroad, Yemen 569w
World Trade Organisation, Bananas 242–3w

Roe, Mrs Marion
Questions
Access to Parliament, Work experience 123w
All party groups 217w
Environmental health 700–1
House of Commons, Postal services 400w
Members' facilities, Smoking 124w

Rogers, Mr Allan
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 195–7
Questions
National Assembly of Wales 301

Rolling stock leasing companies
Finance 71–2w

Rolls Royce
Government assistance to industry 626–7w

Rooker, Mr Jeff, Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Questions
Agricultural research 618–9w
Beef, Cattle 331w
Beef, Exports 233–4w
Beef, Food standards 380–1
Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council 342w
Birds, Nature conservation 619w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 331w, 334–40w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Disease control 332–3w, 342w, 365w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Inquiries 233w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Waste disposal 619w
British Cattle Movement Service 545w
Cattle 135w
Cattle, Animal breeding 384
Cattle, Disease control 137w
Cattle, Imports 513–4w
Common agricultural policy 331w, 399w
Developing countries trade, Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 618w
Diets, Economic regions 385
Dounreay, Radioactive waste disposal 386–7
E coli, Lancaster 381
Export of live animals 618w
Export of live animals, Inspections 340–1w
Export of live animals, Sheep 135w, 618w
Fish, Food standards 381
Food labelling 339w
Food standards 381
Green pound 362–3w
Hill farming 384–5
Hill livestock allowances 233w
Livestock, EC external trade 340w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, Regional panels 363–5w
Monetary compensatory amounts 513w
Pesticide residues, Food contamination 35w
Pigs, Animal feed 38w
Radioactive waste disposal, Sea pollution 386
Slaughterhouses, Food hygiene 330w
Toxicity of Chemicals in Food Consumer Products and the Environment Committee, Vitamin B6 38–9w

Rooker, Mr Jeff—continued
Tuberculosis in Cattle and Badgers Review 39w
Vitamin B6 385–6
Waste disposal, Sea pollution 198w

Rooney, Mr Terry
Questions
Dept of Health, Cash limits 218–9w
Disability living allowance, Benefit integrity project 301w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Members' constituency work 171w
Home Office, Members' constituency work 29w
Immigrants' dependants, Immigration rules 29w
Immigration 29w
Members' correspondence 14–5w, 362w, 374w, 646w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Administrative delays 11w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Members' correspondence 11w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Vacancies 11w
NHS trusts, Mergers 537w
Political refugees 26w

Ross, Mr Ernie
Questions
EC Labour and Social Affairs Council 527–8w
New deal for young unemployed, Scotland 97–8
Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum 355–6w
Scottish Council for Educational Technology, Efficiency scrutinies 356–7w
Scottish Office, Cash limits 230–2w
Scottish Parliament, Parliamentary buildings 157–8w
Scottish Prison Service, Recruitment 305w

Ross, Mr William
Questions
Cattle, Northern Ireland 395–6w
Police stations, Coleraine 8w
Stormont, Monuments 394w
UK passport holders, Republic of Ireland 30w, 407w

Rostrevor
Demonstrations 692w

Rowe, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 327
Questions
Business questions 1046–7
Channel tunnel, Railway network 477w
Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996, Environment protection 279w
Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996, Government grants 477w
Eurostar, Passengers 477w
New deal for young unemployed, Mentally disadvantaged 97
Youth unemployment 1034–5

Rowlands, Mr Ted
Questions
Concessionary television licences 564

Rowntree
Residential care 433w

Royal Berkshire and Battle Hospitals NHS Trust
691–2

Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust

Royal Bournemouth and Christchurch Hospitals NHS Trust—continued
349w

Royal Clarence Yard
256w

Royal Fleet Auxiliary
Foreigners 82w

Royal Irish Regiment
322–4w

Royal Opera House
353w
English National Opera 610w

Royal Ulster Constabulary
Complaints 320–1w
Housing 289w

Royal yacht
262w, 361w

Ruane, Mr Chris
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 264
Questions
Burglar alarms, Hoaxes and false alarms 461w
Cost per student 33w
Death rate, Weather 103w
Doctors' list of patients, Wales 50w
Foreign investment in UK, North Wales 129–30w
Ministers' domestic visits, Wales 236w
Multiple occupation 64w
School population, Wales 517w

Ruffley, Mr David
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 211
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 416, 419, 422, 429–31
Questions
Crime victims 263w

Rural areas
270w, 332w
Health services 601–2w
Opposition days (04.11.97) 176–220
Town and country planning 273w
Transport policy 277–8w

"Rural England White Paper"
138w

Rural transport
54w
Employment opportunities 1024
Wales 48–9w

Russell, Bob
Debates etc.
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 684–6, 689
Questions
A12 179w
Armed forces housing, Colchester 361w
Bus services, Privatisation 146w
Bus services, Regulatory systems 294–5w
Deportation, Immigrants' dependants 22w
Hazardous wastes, Refuse disposal 31w
Households, Population projection 63w
Labour Party, Finance 903
Legal aid 425w
Lighting, Pollution control 272w
Medical students, Educational qualifications 159–60w
Orange badge scheme 606w
Planning permission, Public houses 275w
Planning permission, Public utilities 275w
Prisons, Colchester 118w, 689w
Public transport, Local authorities 269w
School buildings, Repairs and maintenance 31–2w

Russell, Bob—*continued*
Telecommunications technology, Planning permission 274w
Warships 112–3w

Russia
Ministers' visits abroad 261w
Nuclear safety 630w
Religious freedom 261w

Ryan, Ms Joan
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 599, 662
Questions
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions, Cash limits 195–7w

Safety measures
Inland waterways 138w
Jet skis 138–9w
Railway travel 69–70w
Rivers 138w

St Aubyn, Mr Nick
Debates etc.
Private roads (03.11.97) 91
Student grants (04.11.97) 145–8
Questions
Discretionary student grants 1034
World War I, Anniversaries 12–3

Salter, Mr Martin
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 403–4
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1095, 1101, 1108–10
Questions
New deal for young unemployed 32–3w
Northern Ireland Audit Review Group 8w

Salvage
Tugboats 57w

Sanctions
Iraq 579–81, 583

Sanders, Mr Adrian
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 832–3
Questions
Absent parents, Income 188w
Charitable collections 557–9w
Cheques, EC countries 354w
Diabetes, Medical equipment 187w
Income support, Mortgages 188w, 634–5w
Maintenance, Children 189w
Mobility allowance, Age 191–2w
NHS trusts, Finance 597–9w
Organic farming, EC grants and loans 234w
White Rock Business Park Paignton, Planning inquiries 152w

Sapphire
see MFV Sapphire

Savidge, Mr Malcolm
Questions
Community protection orders 310
Court of Appeal (Civil Division) Review 266–7w

Sayeed, Mr Jonathan
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 589
Rural areas (04.11.97) 213
Questions
Know-how Fund 589w

School admission
444w, 667w
Grant maintained schools 667w
Hertfordshire 1029

School admission—*continued*
Northern Ireland 8w

School buildings
Repairs and maintenance 31–2w

School governors
668w

School meals
162w, 381w
Derbyshire 161–2w

School milk
35w

School population
Pre-school education 33–4w
Wales 517w

Schools
313, 1029–30
Capital investment 128w
European strategic programme for research in information 245w
Polling stations 375w
Security 35w

Science and technology research
EC action (11.11.97) 816
Tax allowances 297w

Scientific Procedures Inspectorate
283–4w

Scotland
Agriculture 155w
Alcohol and crime 102
Appropriate adults 95–6
Beta-interferon 46–7w
Capital receipts initiative 575w
Criminal proceedings 95
Devolution 154w
Economic and monetary union 99
Electorate 574–5w
Fishing quotas 153w
Food contamination (06.11.97) 466
Forestry Commission 155w
Health authorities 653w
Health education 157w
Health services 653–4w
Higher education 154w
Hospitals 103
Housing finance 104–5
Local government constituencies 47–8w
Local government corruption 101
Local government finance 100–1, 104
Local government social services 101
Local government staff 105
Low flying 251w
MFV Sapphire 99–100
New deal for young unemployed 96–8
NHS administration 107
NHS finance 156w
NHS trusts 106–7, 158w
Parole 101–2
Post-operative care 48w
Pre-school education 154w
Prison population 101–2
Prisoners 305w
Public expenditure 155w
Referendums 155w
Residential care 156w
Social services 682–3w
Teacher training 157w
Tuition fees 156–7w, 228w, 308–9, 398w, 496w, 683w, 1020, 1028
University finance 100
Whisky 154w

Scottish Affairs Select Committee
Community care 575w

Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum
355–6w

Scottish Council for Educational Technology
Efficiency scrutinies 356–7w

Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission
96, 153w

Scottish Executive
Council of Ministers 98–9, 105–6
Ministers 106

Scottish health boards
Bureaucracy 154w
Finance 232w

Scottish National Sleep Laboratory
654w

Scottish Office
Billing 46w
Cash limits 230–2w
Civil servants' visits abroad 656w
Developing countries trade 655w
Government contracts 302–3w
Greenhouse effect 656w
Legislation 305w
Millennium compliance 158–9w
Monitor Consultancy 654–5w
Tax avoidance 233w
Taxation 232–3w

Scottish Parliament
107–8
EC law 157w
Health services 702
Parliamentary buildings 157–8w

Scottish Prison Service
Recruitment 305w

Scottish Student Awards Agency
see Student Awards Agency for Scotland

Sea level
Greenhouse effect 168–9w
Islands 168–9w

Sea navigation
River Thames (05.11.97) 271–8

Sea pollution
Radioactive waste disposal 386
Waste disposal 198w

Sea rescue
Solent 281–2w

Seals
260–1w

Secret societies
Judiciary 425w

Security
Northern Ireland 292–3w
Party conferences 373–4w
Schools 35w

Security Service
see MI5

Security Service Tribunal
Complaints 4w

Security vetting
Hotels 374w
Ireland 374w

Sedgemore, Mr Brian
Questions
Hackney Education Authority, Inspections 529–30w

Seeds
Genetically modified organisms 71w

Select committees
Intelligence services 5w

Sellafield
Radioactive waste disposal 55w

Sentencing
Appeals 264w, 390–1

Sewage
271w, 365w
Floods 270–1w, 550w

Sexual offences
Data banks 212w

Sey, Ibrahima
459w

Shares
Simon of Highbury, Lord 42w

Shayler, David
MI5 24w, 215–6w

Sheep
Export of live animals 135w, 618w

Sheep premiums
378–9, 514w

Sheerman, Mr Barry
Debates etc.
Road safety (05.11.97) 238–40, 246
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 334w
Film industry, Manpower 571w
UNESCO 589w

Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1072–5
Questions
National Audit Office 15–6
National Audit Office, House of Commons select committees 5–6w
National Audit Office, Manpower 344w
National Audit Office, Private finance initiative 16

Sheltered housing
Finance 246w, 456–8w

Shephard, Rt Hon Gillian
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 397–8
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1067–72
Parliamentary procedure (05.11.97) 365
Questions
Business statements 1037–40

Ship chartering
Merchant ships 577–9w

Ships
Montserrat 896

Short, Rt Hon Clare, Secretary of State for International Development
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Ministerial statements (05.11.97) 315–32
Questions
Belarus, Know-how Fund 589w
Belarus, Overseas aid 638w
Bosnia-Herzegovina, Overseas aid 592w
Caribbean, Bananas 93–4w
Chernobyl, Nuclear accidents 593w
Commonwealth Development Corporation 894–5
Developing countries, Child workers 91–2w, 896–7
Developing countries, Debts written off 588w
Developing countries, Small businesses 592–3w
Development Assistance Committee, Women 590w
Ethiopia, Overseas aid 93w
Free trade 889–90
Indonesia, Rain forests 591w
Iran, Refugees 591w

Short, Rt Hon Clare—continued
Millennium compliance, Dept for International Development 92–3w
Mines 898
Montserrat, Disasters 891–2
Montserrat, Housing construction 890–1
Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency 592w
Overseas aid 592w
Overseas aid, Human rights 589w
Papua New Guinea, Overseas aid 94w
Restrictive trade practices 593w, 892
Restrictive trade practices, Tobacco industry 892–3
Slavery 592w
Sudan, Overseas aid 638w
Tibet, Overseas aid 591w
UNESCO 589w
Westland Helicopters, India 1w
World Bank, Developing countries 590–1w

Shropshire
Dental services 536w

Simon of Highbury, Lord
Shares 42w

Simpson, Mr Alan
Questions
Members' facilities, Smoking 124w

Simpson, Mr Keith
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 962–3, 966
Questions
Armed forces, Career structure 110w
Arms exports, Export licensing 614w
Business questions 1045–6
Defence expenditure 10
Defence industries, Diversification 113w
Defence review 82w, 581w
Helicopters, Armed forces 582w
Higher education, Wales 304
Information warfare 614w
Millennium Exhibition 451w
Ministry of Defence, Public relations 580w
Ministry of Defence Police 579–80w
NATO, Armed forces officers 581w
NATO, Public appointments 581w
Territorial Army 580w
Territorial Army, Pay 579w
VAT, Historic buildings 258w

Sites of special scientific interest
58w
Hatfield Moor 58w
Thorne Moors 58w

Skinner, Mr Dennis
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 401
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1050
Political parties, Points of order (11.11.97) 708
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 329
Questions
Business questions 1040–1
Christianity, Millennium 17
Defence review 80w
Dioxins, Bolsover 330–1w
Election expenditure 903
Health authorities, Finance 534w
House of Commons times of sittings 111
National Lottery 568
NHS, Pay 696–7
UN Special Commission on Iraq 1161–2

Skye bridge
103–4

Slaughterhouses
Food hygiene 330w

Slavery
592w

Slovakia
Human rights 201w
Political refugees 18–20w

Small businesses
40w
Billing 41–2w
Business Link 296w
Developing countries 592–3w
Government grants 298–9w
Innovation (07.11.97) 481–542
Ministerial responsibility 41–2w
Staffordshire 39–40w, 125w
Tamworth 39–40w

Smith, Rt Hon Andrew, Minister for Employment and Disability Rights, Dept for Education and Employment
Questions
ADAPT initiative 556w
EC Labour and Social Affairs Council 527–8w
EC labour policy 441–2w
Employment opportunities, Rural transport 1024
Employment policy 128w
New deal for young unemployed 32–3w, 667w, 1032–4
New deal for young unemployed, Minimum wage 308w
Special education 1033
Welfare to work 442w
Welfare to work, Ethnic groups 442w
Youth unemployment 1034–5

Smith, Angela
Debates etc.
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 687
Questions
Animal experiments 374w
Chiropody 661–2w, 681–2w
Westland Helicopters, India 1w

Smith, Rt Hon Chris, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport
Questions
Arts 406w
British Academy of Sport 560, 569
Concessionary television licences 563–4
Dept for Culture Media and Sport, Cash limits 208w
Members' correspondence, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 108w
Millennium 559
Millennium, Church buildings 559–60
Millennium, Education 465w
Millennium Fund 406w
National Lottery 404–5w, 567–9
National Lottery, Health services 404w
National Lottery, Play facilities 404w
Radio broadcasting licences 566–7
Royal Opera House 353w
Sports, Television 569–70

Smith, Jacqui
Questions
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, Inquiries 233w
Creutzfeldt-Jakob dementia 346w
Leasehold Valuation Tribunal, Administrative delays 271–2w
NHS finance, Worcestershire 904

Smith, Mr John
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 253

Smith, Mr Llew
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 712
Questions
Bevan, Aneurin, Prescription charges 701–2
British Nuclear Fuels 43w
Carbon dioxide, Nuclear power 570w
Countryside Council for Wales 238w
EC presidency 385w, 389w
Environmental policy, Cabinet committees 546w
Iraq, Nuclear weapons 388w
Islands, Sea level 168–9w
Mixed oxide fuel, Transport of radioactive materials 44w, 139–40w
Nuclear safety, EC law 485w
Nuclear safety, Russia 630w
Nuclear weapons policy 3–4
Organophosphorous pesticides 614w
Transport of radioactive materials 146–7w
UN Committee on Disarmament and International Security, Nuclear weapons 168w
UN Security Council, Iraq 387–8w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 500w
United Nations, Festivals and special occasions 169w

Smith, Sir Robert
Debates etc.
Local Government (Contracts) Bill, Lords amendts (11.11.97) 812
Magistrates' courts, Essex (10.11.97) 688
Student grants (04.11.97) 146
Questions
Prison population, Scotland 102

Smoking
Members' facilities 124w
Young people 698

Smoking related diseases
Costs 537–8w

Smyth, Rev Martin
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 157
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 329–30
Questions
British Academy of Sport 560
Business questions 1043
Hospital waiting lists 537w
NHS, Pay 696
Special education, Teacher training 1030–1
Sudan, National service 560w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 582–3

Soames, Mr Nicholas
Questions
Armed forces 10–1
Business questions 1046
NHS administration 694
NHS Supplies Authority, Contracts for services 661w
Political refugees 18w
Statistics 505w

Social security
90w
Expenditure 85w
Interest groups 454w

Social security and taxation
564–5w

Social security appeals
455w
Disability living allowance 632–4w
Incapacity benefit 531w

Social security benefits
Political refugees 85w, 190w

Social security benefits backdating
85–6w

Social security benefits reductions
Family benefits 84–5w

Social security claims
Lone parents 676–7w
Student loans 675w

Social Security (Lone Parents) (Amendment) Regulations 1997
Debates etc.
(05.11.97) 333

Social security payments
188w
Northern Ireland 202–4w

Social security recipients
Lone parents 88w

Social security reciprocal agreements
Pensions 190–1w

Social services
Inter agency cooperation 519w, 658w, 682–3w
Scotland 682–3w
Wales 519w

Solar power
148w

Solent
Sea rescue 281–2w

Soley, Mr Clive
Questions
Caribbean, Bananas 589–90w
Civil proceedings, Northern Ireland 695w
Families 311
Police, Contracts for services 560w

Solicitors
Complaints 52w

Solihull Hospital
350w, 693

Solvent abuse
Butane gas 119w
Retail trade 25w

Somalia
Overseas aid 894

South West region
Hospital waiting lists 596–7w

Southampton
Meningitis 659–60w

Southern Health and Social Services Board
Public appointments 204w, 586w

Southworth, Ms Helen
Questions
Business questions 1043

Space technology
Nuclear safety 378w

Spain
Bulls 175w

***Speaker and deputies**, For rulings and statements see separate heading Speaker's rulings and statements*
Debates etc.
(14.11.97) 1178, 1211
Amendments and new clauses (04.11.97) 118, 176, (10.11.97) 586, (11.11.97) 810–1, 813, 815
Conduct of proceedings (03.11.97) 6, 12, 63, 68, 81, 90, (04.11.97) 115, 118, 131, 133, 139, 150, 159, 166, 167, 176, 186, 189–90, 197, 203, 212–3, (05.11.97) 270, 278, 304, 307–8, 322–3, 332, 346–7, (06.11.97) 407, 422, 434–5, 441,

***Speaker and deputies**—continued*
(07.11.97) 494, 498, 500, 502, 509, 520, (10.11.97) 562, 568, 570, 611, 620, 645, 664, 670–1, 677–9, 681–2, (11.11.97) 728, 757, 810, (12.11.97) 840, 850, 856, 874, 899, 907, 948, 963, 984–5, 991, 1002, 1012, (13.11.97) 1050, 1075
Disallowed questions (06.11.97) 385, (13.11.97) 1028
Non-procedural matters (06.11.97) 405
Points of order (03.11.97) 75, 91, 94, (04.11.97) 114, (05.11.97) 333, (06.11.97) 410, 438, 442, (10.11.97) 584–6, 682, (11.11.97) 707–8, 711, (13.11.97) 1050
Royal Assent (06.11.97) 410
Standing Order No 24 applications, Iraq (04.11.97) 113

Speaker's rulings and statements
Ten minutes rule (04.11.97) 118, 176

Special education
702w, 1030–1, 1033
Teacher training 1030–1

***Spellar, Mr John**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Ministry of Defence*
Questions
Air force, Defence review 8–9
Animal experiments, Defence research 687w
Armed forces housing, Colchester 361w
Arms exports, Export licensing 7–8, 614w
Arms surplus sales 686–7w
Arms trade 252w, 627w
Arms trade, USA 615w
Batteries, Defence procurement 79–80w
Billing, Ministry of Defence 114–5w
Chinook helicopters, Air accidents 687w
Defence equipment, Exhibitions 110w, 113–4w, 253w, 317w, 612–4w
Defence industries 4, 9
Defence industries, Diversification 79w, 113w
Defence industries, Technology transfer 4–5, 8
Defence land, Hunting 325–9w, 451w
Defence land, Property transfer 316w
Defence procurement 251–2w
Defence support agencies 311–6w
European fighter aircraft 78w, 111w, 254–5w, 615w
European fighter aircraft, Costs 111–2w
European fighter aircraft, Defence procurement 111w
Future large aircraft 255w
Harrier aircraft, Air accidents 318w
Hawk aircraft, Indonesia 112w
Hercules aircraft, Defence procurement 256w
Low flying, Military aircraft 79w
Low flying, Scotland 251w
Members' correspondence, Ministry of Defence 113w
Military aircraft, Costs 255w
Military aircraft, Defence procurement 255w
Millennium compliance, Ministry of Defence 108–9w
NATO, Millennium compliance 109–10w
Police equipment, Chemical weapons 316–7w
Royal Clarence Yard 256w
Transport aircraft 255–6w
Trident, Costs 110–1w
Unidentified flying objects, Defence research 450w
Vaccination, Defence research 317w
Warships 112–3w
Weapons 615w

***Spellar, Mr John**—continued*
Western European Armaments Organisation 253w
Western European Union, Defence procurement 252w

Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Questions
Meat 388–9
Office of Water Services, Public appointments 603w

Spicer, Sir Michael
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 718, 764, 767–9
Traffic lights (12.11.97) 871–2, 874
Questions
Education of children at home 443–4w
Health services, Scotland 653–4w

Sports
Handicapped 566
Television 465w, 569–70

Sports Council for England
Planning permission 550–1w

Sports facilities
Leasehold land 678w
National Lottery 2w, 466–7w

Sports sponsorship
Tobacco advertising 353–4w, 467–8w, 699

Spring, Mr Richard
Debates etc.
Prohibition of Bull Bars Bill, 1R (04.11.97) 116–7
Rural areas (04.11.97) 186
Questions
Commonwealth Development Corporation 894–5
Hospital waiting lists 537w
Student numbers 1023
Tourist industry, EC Social Charter 561

Sri Lanka
Missing persons 265–6w
Peace negotiations 170w

Stabilisation Force in Bosnia
5, 81w, 83w

Staffordshire
Cycling 605w
Small businesses 39–40w, 125w
Training and enterprise councils 522w

Staff-student ratios
447w

Stakeholder pensions
635w

Standard spending assessments
61–2w, 65w

Standing Order No 24 applications
Iraq (04.11.97) 113

Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1102–5, 1125
Questions
Adoption, Cohabitation 74–5w
Environmental health 536w
Millennium Exhibition, Transport infrastructure 570
National Lottery, Health services 404w
Palestinians, Overseas investment 897–8

Statistics
505w

Statute law
Law reform 427–8w

Steen, Mr Anthony
Debates etc.
Biological weapons, West Country (12.11.97) 827
Questions
Alternative medicine 904
Assisted places scheme, Devon 226w
Beef, Exports 233–4w
Cattle, Disease control 137w
Delegated legislation 123w
House of Commons catering, Beef 217w
Legal aid 426w
Legal Aid Board, Fees and charges 426–7w
Legislation, Departmental responsibilities 262–3w
Opera 406w
Pupil exclusions 528w
Windfall tax, Water and sewerage companies 505w

Sterling
Exchange rates 16w

Stevenson, Mr George
Debates etc.
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 58
Questions
Cabinet Office, Cash limits 208w
Office for Standards in Education, Operating costs 308w
Tobacco advertising 699

Stinchcombe, Mr Paul
Questions
Armed forces training 494–5w, 576w
Armed forces training, Kenya 494w
House of Commons committees, Human rights 400w
Human rights 415–6w

Stoate, Dr Howard
Questions
National Lottery, Health services 404w
New deal for young unemployed 1034

Stormont
Monuments 394w

Stow-on-the-Wold
Magistrates' courts 575

***Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin**, Minister of State for Transport, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions*
Questions
British Railways Board, External financing limits 193w
EC Transport Council 193–4w
Railway transport, Regulatory systems 282w
Railway travel, Performance standards 280–1w

***Straw, Rt Hon Jack**, Secretary of State for the Home Dept*
Debates etc.
Police (14.11.97) 1137–48, 1150–2, 1154–5, 1176
Questions
Billing, Home Office 21w
Civil servants' visits abroad, Home Office 643–4w
Community Fire Safety Task Force 212–3w
HM Fire Service Inspectorate 282w
Home Office, Cash limits 209–10w
Home Office, Private finance initiative 649–50w
Intelligence Services Act 1994 25w
Interception of Communications Act 1985 26–7w

***Straw, Rt Hon Jack**—continued*
Judgments 419–23w
Legislation, Home Office 211w
Mail on Sunday, Injunctions 418–9w
Members' correspondence, Home Office 120w
MI5, Surveillance 119w
Millennium compliance, Home Office 120–1w
Ministers' visits abroad, Home Office 642–4w
Monitor Consultancy, Home Office 374–5w
Official hospitality, Home Office 640–1w
Party conferences, Security 373–4w
Police, Contracts for services 560w
Police, Performance standards 29w
Prison Service 423–4w
Prison Service, Annual reports 639w
Prisoners' transfers, Republic of Ireland 26w
Publicity, Home Office 641–2w
Security vetting, Hotels 374w
Sexual offences, Data banks 212w
Shayler, David, MI5 24w, 215–6w
Tax avoidance, Home Office 213w
Taxation, Home Office 213w

Streeter, Mr Gary
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 26
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 940, 992–8
HMS Argyll, Points of order (05.11.97) 333
Questions
EC countries, Police 391w
EC countries, Visas 392w
European Commission 392w
France, Foreign policy 175–6w
Marines 81w
Refugees 391w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Equal pay 172w
Treaty of Amsterdam, Labour and employment 172–3w

Stringer, Mr Graham
Questions
Commonwealth games, Manchester 312
Regional airports 63–4w

Structure plans
57w, 272w

Stuart, Ms Gisela
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 403

Student Awards Agency for Scotland
397–8w

Student grants
1022–3
Costs 310w, 445w
Drama education 672w
Opposition days (04.11.97) 118–75

Student loans
(03.11.97) 76–85, 260w, 307w, 443w
Non-payment 310w
Part-time education 307w
Social security claims 675w

Student numbers
310w, 666w, 1021, 1023
Overseas students 310w, 444–5w

Stunell, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Fossil Fuel Levy Bill (HL), 2R (05.11.97) 360–1, 364
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 681
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1094–7

Stunell, Mr Andrew—continued
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1059
Questions
Climate Change Convention, UK delegations 464w
Copyright, Data banks 571w
Environmental Audit Select Committee 609w
Greenhouse effect 604–6w
Greenhouse effect, Dept for Culture Media and Sport 677–8w
Greenhouse effect, Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 552–3w
Greenhouse effect, Dept of Trade and Industry 571w
Greenhouse effect, Foreign and Commonwealth Office 637w
Greenhouse effect, Home Office 647–8w
Greenhouse effect, Scottish Office 656w
Greenhouse effect, Welsh Office 685w
Sustainable development 378w

Sudan
National service 560w
Overseas aid 638w
Peace negotiations 560w

Suicide
437w
Leeds Prison 690w
Paracetamol 508w

Summertime
23–4w
Crime prevention 119w

Supermarkets
Northern Ireland 7w

Supply estimates
Public expenditure 224w

Supreme Court (Offices) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 407–54
Order relating to Com (03.11.97) 85

Surgery
380w

Surveillance
Codes of practice 282w
MI5 119w
Northern Ireland 320w

Sustainable development
378w
Ministerial statements (05.11.97) 315–32

Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 25–6
Private roads (03.11.97) 87–8
Questions
Leeds Prison, Suicide 690w

Swayne, Mr Desmond
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 406
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 973, 989–90
Student grants (04.11.97) 126–7
Questions
Cattle, Animal breeding 384
Scottish Executive, Council of Ministers 106
Territorial Army 1–2
Tuition fees, Wales 235w

Swindon
Dental services 706

Swinney, Mr John
Questions
Monetary Policy Committee, Interest rates 567w
Scottish Executive, Ministers 106

Syms, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
Poole Harbour bridge (12.11.97) 1008–12
Questions
National Assembly of Wales, Referendums 235w
Tobacco advertising 536–7w

Take-away food shops
Planning permission 275w

Take-up of employment
Unemployed 624–5w

Tamworth
Small businesses 39–40w

Tapsell, Sir Peter
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 755–63, 803
Questions
Official engagements 567w

Tavistock
Magistrates' courts 428w

Tax allowances
Health insurance 185w
Income tax 510w
Science and technology research 297w

Tax and Benefits Task Force
259w

Tax assessment
Dept of Health 184w

Tax avoidance
Dept for Education and Employment 227w
Dept of Health 219w
Dept of Social Security 247w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 195w
Dept of Trade and Industry 402w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office 636w
Government departments 354–5w
Home Office 213w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341–2w
Ministry of Defence 252w
NHS 184–5w
Scottish Office 233w
Welsh Office 240w

Tax harmonisation
EC countries 258w, 509w

Tax rates and bands
565w

Tax thresholds
Inheritance tax 623w

Tax yields
510w
Betting and gaming duties 624w
Taxable benefits 454–5w

Taxable benefits
Tax yields 454–5w

Taxation
Dept for Education and Employment 227–8w
Dept of Health 219w
Dept of Social Security 247w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions 194w
Dept of Trade and Industry 627–9w
Home Office 213w
Married people 565w

Taxation—continued
Milk Development Council 573w
Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food 341w
Ministry of Defence 318w
Northern Ireland Office 289w
Personal savings 100w, 355w
Quarrying 260w
Scottish Office 232–3w
Treasury 258w, 636–7w
Voting methods 100w
Welsh Office 240w

Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann, President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons
Debates etc.
Business statements (06.11.97) 395–406
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 682–3
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1061–7, 1069, 1077, 1083, 1091, 1126–8
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1053–4, 1060
Parliamentary procedure (05.11.97) 365
Questions
Backbenchers 108–9
Business statements 1037–48
Delegated legislation 123w
Drug abuse 115w
Electronic mail, President of the Council 609w
Environment Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee 112
Environmental Audit Select Committee 288w, 609w
Finance Bill 1997/98, Legislative process 108
Fletcher, Yvonne, Police deaths on duty 122w
Government offices for the regions, Accountability 112
House of Commons Chamber 122w
House of Commons committees, Human rights 400w
House of Commons debates 109–10
House of Commons staff 109
House of Commons times of sittings 111
Members' staff 123w
Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee 108, 110, 122w
Parliamentary questions, Disclosure of information 121w
Parliamentary recess 122w
UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator 115w, 257–8w

Taylor, Mr David
Debates etc.
Rural areas (04.11.97) 208–9
Questions
Access to countryside 604w
GP fundholders 535w
Sexual offences, Data banks 212w

Taylor, Mr Ian
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 918, 940–1
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 487–8, 502, 506–12
Questions
Arms exports, Export licensing 7–8
Millennium compliance, Government departments 468–9w

Taylor, Rt Hon John D
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 744

Taylor, Rt Hon John D—continued
Questions
Access to Neighbouring Land Act 1992, Northern Ireland 98w
Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust, Flags 6w
Meningitis, Southampton 659–60w
Preparatory schools, Northern Ireland 288w
School admission, Northern Ireland 8w
Southern Health and Social Services Board, Public appointments 204w
Supermarkets, Northern Ireland 7w

Taylor, Mr John M
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 401
Supreme Court (Offices) Bill, 2R and rem stages (06.11.97) 409–10, 414, 420, 422, 427–9, 443, 446–8
Questions
Indonesia, Military vehicles 266w
Legal aid 427w
Solihull Hospital 350w, 693

Taylor, Kevin
Greater Manchester Police 24w

Taylor, Mr Matthew
Questions
Bridges, Road works 272–3w
Community hospitals, Cornwall 599w
826 squadron 576–7w
Emergency planning, Telephone systems 648w, 650–1w
HMS Tiger 582w
Hospital waiting lists, South West region 596–7w
Nuclear Accident Response Organisation 580w
Nuclear weapons, Emergency planning 580–1w
Nuclear weapons, Transport of radioactive materials 580w
Road works, Local government expenditure 275–7w
Transport policy, Rural areas 277–8w
VAT, Energy conservation 625w
WE 177 nuclear bomb 581w

Taylor, Sir Teddy
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 915, 929–30, 967–71
Questions
Devolution, Scotland 154w
Drinking and driving, Road accidents 480w
European Movement, UK-contributions 175w
Royal yacht 262w

Taylor Task Force
see Tax and Benefits Task Force

Teacher training
Scotland 157w
Special education 1030–1

Teachers
Early retirement 310w, 446w
Redundancy 310w, 445–6w

Technical assistance
Windward Islands 440–1w

Technology transfer
Defence industries 4–5, 8

Telecommunications industry
Regulatory systems 568w

Telecommunications technology
Colchester 493w
Planning permission 70–1w, 152–3w, 274w, 491–3w

Telecommunications technology—continued
Radiation hazards 7w, 395w
Tendring 493w
Wales 517w

Telephone systems
Emergency planning 648w, 650–1w

Telephones
British embassies 264w

Television
Cartoons 565–6
Sports 465w, 569–70

Television licences
Hotels 468w

Ten minutes rule
Speaker's rulings and statements (04.11.97) 118, 176

Tenant eviction
603w

Tendring
Telecommunications technology 493w

Tennis
466w
Clubs 466w
National Lottery 466w
Physical education 446w, 669w

Territorial Army
1–2, 81w, 580w
Armed forces women 3
Pay 579w
Peace keeping operations 81w

Thailand
Visas 165w

Thalidomide
663–4w

Thomas, Mr Gareth
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 260–2
Regulation of Wet Bikes Bill, 1R (11.11.97) 709–10
Questions
Beef, Wales 304
Developing countries, Child workers 896
Road construction, Wales 236w

Thorne Moors
Sites of special scientific interest 58w

THORP
Nuclear fuel reprocessing 297w

Tibet
Overseas aid 591w

Timms, Mr Stephen
Debates etc.
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 496, 498, 500–6
Questions
Cable systems, Radio 44w
EC Finance Council 16–8w, 504w
Economic and monetary union 223w
European Commission budget 103w
Gold and foreign exchange reserves, Official publications 566w
Limited liability, Law reform 125w

Tin
Cornwall 124w

Tipping, Mr Paddy
Questions
British Academy of Sport 407w, 467w
Nottingham Health Authority, Finance 434w
Overseas aid, Personal loans 588w
Pre-school education 666w

Tipping of waste
487–8w, 553w
Methane 487w

Tobacco advertising
536–7w, 699–701, 703–4, 898–901
Arts sponsorship 353–4w
Motor sports 699
Sports sponsorship 353–4w, 467–8w, 699
Young people 704

Tobacco industry
Restrictive trade practices 892–3

Todd, Mr Mark
Questions
Common agricultural policy 330w, 399w
Government contracts, Dept of Social Security 248–9w
Government contracts, Scottish Office 302–3w
Gulf War syndrome, Medical research 14
New deal for young unemployed, Minimum wage 308w
NHS finance, Derbyshire 906
NHS finance, Trent 691

Tonge, Dr Jenny
Debates etc.
Hospitals, South West London (14.11.97) 1212
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 322–3
Questions
Algeria, Capital punishment 389–90w
Bosnia-Herzegovina, War crimes 390w
Burma, Human rights 15w
Chernobyl, Nuclear accidents 593w
Democratic Republic of the Congo, Refugees 167w
GP fundholders, Private health services 542w
International Criminal Court 390–1w
Multilateral Agreement on Investment 569w
NHS, Managers 543w
Overseas aid 893–4
Sudan, Overseas aid 638w
Sudan, Peace negotiations 560w

Total allowable catches
515–6w

Touhig, Mr Don
Questions
Gwent Tertiary College 304–5

Tourism
EC presidency 208w

Tourist industry
EC budget 513w
EC Social Charter 561
Minimum wage 560–2
Welfare to work 107w, 567

Tourists
Millennium Exhibition 571–2

Tower Hamlets
Ethnic minorities 644w

Town and country planning
Demolition 551–2w
Housing 68w
Leisure facilities 481w
Maidenhead (12.11.97) 881–8
Rural areas 273w

Town and Country Planning (Demolition - Description of Buildings) Direction 1995
Questions
551–2w, 603–4w

Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995
Questions
550–1w

Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995
Questions
274w, 603–4w

Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987
Questions
554w

Toxicity of Chemicals in Food Consumer Products and the Environment Committee
Vitamin B6 38–9w

Track access grant
Railway freight transport 486w

Trade fairs
Defence equipment 692w

Trade missions
Yemen 125w

Trade promotion
Yemen 569–70w

Trade unions
EC countries 311w
Gaming clubs 460w

Trading standards
Children 298w

Traffic lights
(12.11.97) 871–4

Traffic noise
366w

Train operating units
Performance standards 139w, 367–8w

Training
Animal experiments 284–5w
Athletics 564
Judiciary 638w

Training and enterprise councils
Fraud 1022–3
Per capita costs 525–6w
Staffordshire 522w

Transmissible encephalopathies
331w

Transplant surgery
Research 351–2w, 664w

Transport aircraft
255–6w

Transport and Works (Descriptions of Works Interfering with Navigation) (Amendment) Order 1997
Debates etc.
(12.11.97) 1007

Transport infrastructure
Data banks 696w
Millennium Exhibition 570

Transport of radioactive materials
146–7w
Air safety 278w
Mixed oxide fuel 44w, 139–40w
Nuclear weapons 580w

Transport policy
310–1, 905–6
Rural areas 277–8w

Transport supplementary grants
Wyre Piddle bypass 552w

Travelling expenses
Ministers 452w

Treasury
Bank of England 506w
Billing 98–9w
Cash limits 223–4w
Developing countries trade 625w
Government information services 354w
International conferences 104–7w
Legislation 355w
Members' correspondence 564w
Millennium compliance 621–2w
Monitor Consultancy 565–6w
Taxation 258w, 636–7w

Treasury Solicitor's Dept
Cash limits 193w

Treaty of Amsterdam
200w, 264w, 500w, 678w, (12.11.97) 910–1007
Common fisheries policy 173w
Equal pay 172w
European Court of Justice 500–1w
European Parliament 172w
Labour and employment 172–3w
Treaty on European Union 200w

Treaty of Rome
168w

Treaty on European Union
Treaty of Amsterdam 200w

Tredinnick, Mr David
Questions
Television, Cartoons 565–6
Vitamin B6 385–6

Trees
Road works 483w

Trent
NHS finance 691

Trials
267w
Prisoners on remand 413w

Trident
Costs 110–1w
Defence procurement 450w
Defence review 4, 450w

Trimble, Mr David
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1086–92
Questions
Demonstrations, Rostrevor 692w
World War I, Anniversaries 13–4, 313

Truswell, Mr Paul
Questions
Air pollution control 494w
National Lottery, Play facilities 404w

Tuberculosis in Cattle and Badgers Review
39w

Tugboats
Salvage 57w

Tuition fees
665w, 1021, 1028–9
EC countries 398w
Part-time education 308–9w, 556w
Scotland 156–7w, 228w, 308–9, 398w, 496w, 683w, 1020, 1028
Unemployed 308–9w
Wales 235w, 685–6w

Turkey
Iraq 583

Turnberg Review
see Review of Health Care in London Independent Advisory Panel

Turner, Mr Dennis
Questions
Film industry 405w
House of Commons catering, Beef 217w

Turner, Dr George
Questions
Employment opportunities, Rural transport 1024
Political parties, Finance 901

Twigg, Mr Derek
Questions
National grid for learning 668w
Regional challenge 126w

Twigg, Mr Stephen
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 629–33, 661–2
Questions
Orthopaedics 658w

£2 coins
225w

Tyler, Mr Paul
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 398–9
Rural areas (04.11.97) 197–201, 204
Questions
Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification, Business interests 71w
Business questions 1041
Genetically modified organisms, Maize 554w
Genetically modified organisms, Seeds 71w
House of Commons staff 109
Pesticide residues, Food contamination 35w

Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 735, 773–6, 778
Business questions (06.11.97) 404
Nuclear Explosions (Prohibition and Inspections) Bill (HL), 2R (06.11.97) 457, 462
Questions
International conferences, Canary Wharf 617w
NATO, Costs 6

Uganda
Human rights 168w

UK Anti-Drugs Coordinator
115w, 257–8w

UK companies abroad
India 45w
Yemen 569w

UK contributions to EC budget
510–1w

UK delegations
Amsterdam Summit 561w
Climate Change Convention 464w

UK passport holders
Republic of Ireland 30w, 407w

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum
6w

UN Committee on Disarmament and International Security
Nuclear weapons 168w

UN Register of Conventional Arms
563w

UN Security Council
Iraq 387–8w

UN Special Commission on Iraq
14–5, 500w, 577–83, 1159–64

Unemployed
Take-up of employment 624–5w
Tuition fees 308–9w

UNESCO
439–40w, 589w

Unidentified flying objects
Defence research 450w

Uniform business rate
483w

United Bank
472w

United Nations
Festivals and special occasions 169w

Universities
Research finance 1033–4

University finance
669w, 1033–4
Cambridge University 448w
Oxford University 448w
Scotland 100

USA
Arms trade 615w, 620w
Iraq 578–9

Vacancies
Headteachers 700–1w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit 11w

Vaccination
Defence research 317w

VAT
Energy conservation 511w, 566w, 625w
Government departments 354w
Historic buildings 258w
NHS trusts 354w
Public bodies 354w

Vaz, Mr Keith
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 721, 776–80
Questions
Armed forces, Racial discrimination 449–50w
Bank of Credit and Commerce International, Company liquidations 124w
British Coal Corporation, Housing 124w
Child Support Agency 675w
Commonwealth, Yemen 385w
Council housing, Property transfer 145w
Deportation, Illegal immigrants 368–9w
Dept of the Environment Transport and the Regions, Public appointments 273w
Dept of Trade and Industry, Civil service manpower 45w
Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Civil service recruitment 498w
Former Prime ministers 385w
Immigrant detainees, Members' constituency work 24w
Immigrant detainees, Police custody 368w
Immigration and Nationality Division, Immigration applications 371–2w
Immigration and Nationality Division, Manpower 654w
Immigration appeals 425w
Immigration applications, Administrative delays 408–9w, 497w
Immigration applications, Wealth 407–8w
Immigration officers, East Midlands Airport 371w
Industrial relations, Banks 472w
Leicestershire Constabulary 369w
London Underground 478–9w

Vaz, Mr Keith—continued
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Administrative delays 387w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Civil service manpower 166w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Complaints 166w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Departmental correspondence 167w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Members' correspondence 166w
Millennium, Business 261w
Ministers' visits abroad, India 44–5w
Montserrat, Overseas aid 441w
Opencast mining 69w
Overseas trade, Bangladesh 297w
Overseas trade, China 630–1w
Overseas trade, India 44w, 401w
Overseas trade, Pakistan 45w
Overseas trade, Yemen 631–2w
Police, Manpower 462–4w
Prison population 409–11w
Public appointments 261w
Public libraries, Publicity 466w
Radio broadcasting licences 566–7
Regional development agencies 148w
Sports, Television 465w
Trade missions, Yemen 125w
Trade promotion, Yemen 569–70w
Treasury, Bank of England 506w
UK companies abroad, India 45w
UK companies abroad, Yemen 569w
United Bank 472w
Visas 24w
Visas, Administrative delays 361–2w
World Cup 406–7w

Video recordings
"Excellence For All Children Consultation Paper" 309–10w

Viggers, Mr Peter
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 28
Questions
Belarus, Foreign policy 199w
Church Commissioners, Church property 10w
Defence industries, Technology transfer 4–5
European fighter aircraft 111w
European fighter aircraft, Costs 111w
HMS Cavalier 567w
Monuments, Armed conflict 30–1w
Royal Clarence Yard 256w
Sea rescue, Solent 281–2w

Violence on television
465w

Vis, Dr Rudi
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 757
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 988–9, 992
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 663
Questions
Foreign workers, EC countries 309w
Israel, Army 165–6w
Retirement pensions, Retail prices index 247w
Training and enterprise councils, Per capita costs 525–6w
Vocational education, Further education colleges 309w

Visas
24w
Administrative delays 361–2w
EC countries 392w
Thailand 165w

Vitamin B6
385–6
Toxicity of Chemicals in Food Consumer Products and the Environment Committee 38–9w

Viticulture
332w

Vocational education
Further education colleges 309w

Vocational guidance
Wolverhampton 528–9w

"Voice for Wales White Paper"
234w, 238w

Voluntary organisations
Regional development agencies 482w
Welfare to work 527w

Voluntary work
1019
Big Brothers and Big Sisters (13.11.97) 1130–6
Companies 682w

Voting methods
EC common foreign and security policy 172–3w
Taxation 100w

Voting rights
Homelessness (12.11.97) 908–9

Wales
Agriculture (05.11.97) 249–70
Agri-environment action plan 235w
Arms exports 619–20w
Beaches 393w
Beef 303–4
Beta-interferon 128w
Capital receipts initiative 303
Cost per student 238w
Cycling 620w
Defence industries 619–20w
Dentists 129w
Doctors' list of patients 50w
Education 298–9
Educational finance 128w
Employment opportunities 297
Foreign investment in UK 237w, 297–8
General practitioners 518w
Green pound 306w
Health authorities 393w
Higher education 304, 518–9w
Hill livestock allowances 306w
Hospital waiting lists 236w
Housing construction 303
Local government expenditure 305
Local government finance 237w
Ministers' domestic visits 236w
New deal for young unemployed 1027–8
NHS finance 518w
NHS trusts 305–6
Parliamentary constituencies 237w
Police 688w
Pre-school education 236w
Public transport 305–6w
Road construction 236w
Road finance 519w
Rural transport 48–9w
School population 517w
Social services 519w
Telecommunications technology 517w
Tuition fees 235w, 685–6w
Windfall tax 237w

Walking
Children 696–7w

Wallace, Mr James
Debates etc.
Oral question time, Points of order (04.11.97) 114

Wallace, Mr James—continued
Student grants (04.11.97) 134
Questions
Kazakhstan, Human rights 10–1w
Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission 96

Walley, Ms Joan
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1065, 1069, 1075
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1059
Questions
Car sharing 696w
Cycling 605w
Dental services, North Staffordshire 430–1w
Freight facilities grant 486w
Monopolies and Mergers Commission, Newsagents 243w
Pedestrians, Road accidents 606w
Transport infrastructure, Data banks 696w
Walking, Children 696–7w

Walter, Mr Robert
Debates etc.
European Communities (Amendment) Bill, 2R (12.11.97) 986–7
Poole Harbour bridge (12.11.97) 1011
Questions
Common agricultural policy 377–8
National Assembly of Wales, Referendums 235w

War crimes
Bosnia-Herzegovina 5, 390w

War pensions
Earnings rules 84w
Iraq-Kuwait conflict 301–2w

War Pensions and Hearing Loss Review Group
see Noise Induced Hearing Loss and War Pensions Review Group

War Widows and Pensioners (Equal Treatment) Bill 1997/98
Debates etc.
1R (05.11.97) 334–6

War widows' pensions
Earnings rules 84w
Northern Ireland 8w

Ward, Ms Claire
Questions
Lotteries 309
Police, Performance standards 29w
School admission, Hertfordshire 1029

Wardle, Mr Charles,
Debates etc.
Roads, East Sussex (04.11.97) 223, 226

Warehouse parties
Cheshire 215w
Public order policing 215w

Warrington
Higher education 225w

Warships
112–3w

Waste disposal
488w
Bovine spongiform encephalopathy 619w
Paper industry 147w
Sea pollution 198w

Water and sewerage companies
Windfall tax 505w

Water meters
481–2w

Water transport
Millennium Exhibition 570–1

Waterson, Mr Nigel
Debates etc.
Roads, East Sussex (04.11.97) 221–4
Questions
Charities, Investment income 355w
Church schools 1032
Driving licences, Elderly 275w
Entry clearances, Immigration rules 211–2w
Eurostar, Immigration controls 691–2w
Immigration applications, Fraud 651–2w
Law reform 207w
Montserrat, Disasters 266w
Navy, Gulf States 113w
Political refugees 652–3w
Road construction, Private finance initiative 195w
Rural areas 270w
Salvage, Tugboats 57w

Watts, Mr Dave
Questions
Assisted areas 564w
Cost per pupil 669–71w
Local government finance, Capital investment 476–7w
Local government finance, Education vouchers 147w
Personal social services, Government grants to local authorities 679–80w
Revenue support grant 62w
Revenue support grant, Local education authorities 140–1w
Standard spending assessments 62w, 65w

Waveney
Coastal protection 341w

WE 177 nuclear bomb
581w

Wealth
Cambridge University 448w
Immigration applications 407–8w
Oxford University 448w

Weapons
615w

Weather
Death rate 103w, 381–2w, 429–30w
Elderly 601w
Health services 187w, 432–3w
Hospital admissions 539–42w

Webb, Mr Steve
Questions
Disability living allowance, Social security appeals 632–4w
Income support, Mortgages 301w, 455w
Income tax 620–1w
Lone parents, Income support 86–7w
Marginal tax rates 564–5w
One parent benefit 87w
Pensioners, Means tested benefits 249–50w
Social security 90w
Social security, Expenditure 85w
Social security benefits backdating 85–6w
Social security payments 188w

Welfare of Animals (Transport) Order 1997
Questions
398–9w

Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994
Questions
38w, 363w

Welfare to work
442w
Ethnic groups 442w
Handicapped 452–3w

Welfare to work—continued
NHS 539w
Overseas aid 889
Tourist industry 107w, 567
Voluntary organisations 527w
West Midlands 527w

Wellingborough Prison
Death 414w

Wells, Mr Bowen
Debates etc.
Sustainable development, Overseas aid (05.11.97) 325–6
Questions
Defence review 79w
Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency 592w

Welsh, Mr Andrew
Debates etc.
Education (Student Loans) Bill, Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 78–80
Student grants (04.11.97) 129–30, 150–3
Questions
Business questions 1045
Higher education, Scotland 154w
Local government finance, Scotland 104
Tuition fees 1028–9

Welsh assembly
234w
Costs 235w

Welsh Assembly
see National Assembly of Wales

Welsh Development Agency
297
Arms exports 237–8w

Welsh Grand Committee
(03.11.97) 29, 85

Welsh Office
Arms exports 518w
Cash limits 239–40w
Civil servants' visits abroad 520w
Developing countries trade 573–4w
Greenhouse effect 685w
Legislation 306–7w
Millennium compliance 130–1w
Ministerial policy advisors 302–3
Ministers' visits abroad 520w
Monitor Consultancy 358w
Official hospitality 519–20w
Publicity 520–1w
Tax avoidance 240w
Taxation 240w

West Country
Biological weapons (12.11.97) 825–45

West Mercia Constabulary
Chemical weapons 412w

West Midlands
Cable television 402–3w
Dental services 430–1w
New deal for lone parents 633w
Radio broadcasting licences 404w
Welfare to work 527w

West Yorkshire
Magistrates' courts 207w

Western European Armaments Organisation
253w

Western European Union
Defence procurement 252w

Western General Hospital NHS Trust
Private finance initiative 303w

Western Sahara
Referendums 176w

Westland Helicopters
India 1w

Wet bikes
(11.11.97) 709–10

Whisky
Scotland 154w

White, Mr Brian
Questions
Chronic fatigue syndrome, Medical research 182w
Erb's palsy 345w

White Rock Business Park Paignton
Planning inquiries 152w

Whitehead, Dr Alan
Questions
British Railways Board, External financing limits 193w
Polymers, Food 483w
Solar power 148w

Whitney, Sir Ray
Questions
Tobacco advertising, Motor sports 699

Whittingdale, Mr John
Debates etc.
A12, Road construction (12.11.97) 876
Questions
NHS, Pay 695–6

Widdecombe, Rt Hon Ann
Questions
EC Social Charter 311
Educational finance 32w

Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Debates etc.
Agriculture, Wales (05.11.97) 250
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 712
Questions
Developing countries, Child workers 91–2w
Jet skis, Safety measures 138–9w
National Assembly of Wales 300–1
Police, North Wales 21w
Remand in custody 116w
Welsh Development Agency, Arms exports 237–8w

Wilkinson, Mr John
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 400
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 588, 612–3, 633–7, 649, 671
Small businesses, Innovation (07.11.97) 499, 532–6, 538
Questions
Clergy, Retirement age 18
Copywatch 244w
Restrictive trade practices, Tobacco industry 892–3
UN Special Commission on Iraq 580

Willetts, Mr David,
Questions
New deal for young unemployed 1027
Taxation, Married people 565w
Unemployed, Take-up of employment 624–5w

Williams, Rt Hon Alan
Questions
Education, Wales 299
Higher education, Wales 518–9w

Willis, Mr Phil
Debates etc.
Education (Student Loans) Bill, Rep and 3R (03.11.97) 80–2

Willis, Mr Phil—continued
Student grants (04.11.97) 120, 131–2, 146–7, 159

Wills, Mr Michael
Debates etc.
Housing construction (12.11.97) 858–60

Wilshire, Mr David
Debates etc.
Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, 2R (10.11.97) 590
House of Commons Members' Fund (10.11.97) 678–82
Questions
Departmental correspondence 646w

Wilson, Mr Brian, Minister for Education and Industry, Scottish Office
Debates etc.
Student grants (04.11.97) 151, 164–8
Questions
Class sizes, Primary education 155w
Health education, Scotland 157w
Higher education, Scotland 154w
New deal for young unemployed, Mentally disadvantaged 97
New deal for young unemployed, Scotland 96–8
Pre-school education, Scotland 154w
Student Awards Agency for Scotland 397–8w
Tuition fees, EC countries 398w
Tuition fees, Scotland 156–7w, 496w, 683w
Whisky, Scotland 154w

Windfall tax
Wales 237w
Water and sewerage companies 505w

Windward Islands
Technical assistance 440–1w

Winnick, Mr David
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 40[illegible]
Intervention during private notice question (10.11.97) 578
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1049, 1052–3, 1058
Questions
Black Country Development Corporation, Departmental correspondence 70w
Business questions 1045
Departmental correspondence 5w, 459w
Employment Service, Annual reports 382–4w
Hussein, Saddam 578
Immigration, Members' correspondence 200–1w
Intelligence services, Select committees 5w
Migration and Visa Correspondence Unit, Members' correspondence 166w
Military implementation force in Bosnia 5
Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee 122w
Shayler, David, MI5 24w
UN Special Commission on Iraq 577

Winterton, Mrs Ann
Questions
Battery hens, Animal welfare 382
Prison population, Scotland 101–2

Winterton, Mr Nicholas
Debates etc.
Breast cancer, Screening (03.11.97) 27
Firearms (Amendment) Bill, Lords amendts (03.11.97) 31, 33–4, 38–9
Questions
EC Social Charter 314
Montserrat, Overseas aid 895

Winterton, Mr Nicholas—continued
Prescription charges, Pensioners 702
School governors 668w

Winterton, Ms Rosie
Questions
Commonwealth Centre 564w
Day care of children 695
EC Foreign Affairs Council 561–3w
UN Register of Conventional Arms 563w

Witnesses
263w, 678w

Wolverhampton
Vocational guidance 528–9w

Women
Development Assistance Committee 590w
Retirement pensions 594–5w

Wood
Health hazards 142–5w
Production 243w

Wood, Andy
396w

Wood, Mr Mike
Debates etc.
Bank of England Bill, 2R (11.11.97) 753–5
Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (13.11.97) 1052
Questions
Life imprisonment 415w

Woolas, Mr Phil
Questions
Millennium, Education 465w
Radio, Commercial broadcasting 257w
Radio programmes, Children 257w, 565

Worcestershire
NHS finance 904

Work experience
Access to Parliament 123w

World Bank
Developing countries 590–1w

World Cup
406–7w

World Trade Organisation
Bananas 93–4w, 199–200w, 242–3w, 388–9w, 590w

World War I
Anniversaries 12–4, 313

World War II
Monuments 309

Worthington, Mr Tony, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office
Questions
Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust, Flags 6w
Capitation Formula Review Group, Northern Ireland health and social services boards 693–4w
Children, Northern Ireland 358–60w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards 694w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards, Debts 206w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards, Directors 588w
Northern Ireland health and social services boards, Public appointments 586–8w
Northern Ireland health and social services trusts 694w
Northern Ireland health and social services trusts, Debts 205–6w
Preparatory schools, Northern Ireland 288w

Worthington, Mr Tony—continued
Radiation hazards, Telecommunications technology 7w, 395w
School admission, Northern Ireland 8w
Social security payments, Northern Ireland 202–4w
Southern Health and Social Services Board, Public appointments 204w, 586w
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum 6w
War widows' pensions, Northern Ireland 8w

Wright, Dr Tony
Debates etc.
Legislative process (13.11.97) 1097–100
Questions
Labour Party, Finance 905
Modernisation of the House of Commons Select Committee 108
Officer Training Corps 254w
Summertime 23–4w
Summertime, Crime prevention 119w

Wyatt, Derek
Debates etc.
River Thames, Sea navigation (05.11.97) 272

Wyre Piddle bypass
Transport supplementary grants 552w

Xenotransplantation
664w

Yemen
Commonwealth 385w
Overseas trade 631–2w
Trade missions 125w
Trade promotion 569–70w
UK companies abroad 569w

Yeo, Mr Tim
Debates etc.
Business questions (06.11.97) 405
Rural areas (04.11.97) 207–9
Questions
Access to countryside 58w
Climate Change Convention 268w
Common agricultural policy, Farm incomes 330w
Crown Prosecution Service, Civil service manpower 391
Development plans 57w
Environmental policy, Cabinet committees 60w
Legal aid, Insurance companies 573
Radio broadcasting licences 567
"Rural England White Paper" 138w
Structure plans 57w, 272w

Young, Sir George,
Questions
Arms exports, Export licensing 8
Arms trade 252w
Defence equipment 251w
Defence procurement 251–2w
Defence review, Foreign policy 11
Export credit, Arms exports 245–6w
Western European Union, Defence procurement 252w

Young offenders
Remand in custody 213–5w

Young people
Court rules and procedures 546w
Industrial health and safety 217–8w
Smoking 698
Tobacco advertising 704

Youth unemployment
1034–5

Zoos
EC action 149w
Licensing 607–8w

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